

THE DRACULA HORROR SERIES #2

523-00200-095★95¢

The Hand of Dracula!

by Robert Lory

It was just a game,
but the funeral was real
and so were the players.
Only a vampire could
play both sides.



It was too late . . .

The girl was in her mid-twenties. Her nude body looked to be flawless. But there were three things unique about the dead girl's corpse. One was its position. It did not lie in graceful repose as one expects to see the dead. The second was the way her face was stretched into an open-eyed, open-mouthed visage that, surrounded by the long, tousled blonde hair, looked to be nothing less than an eternally silent scream. And then there was the third thing:

The hemp noose that was locked tightly around her throat.

Derek Williams dropped the candle he had been clutching. Something within him sounded its warning. *Get away from here—now!*

But it was too late.

He saw that he was not alone. The hunchback stood in the entryway, the pulled-back curtain still in his huge hand. He made not a move but only grunted. His face appeared furious. Then his features relaxed.

“Young man, it is most unfortunate you saw fit to enter this place. Most unfortunate.”

It was then that the hunchback advanced.

THE HAND OF DRACULA

by
Robert Lory

PINNACLE BOOKS • NEW YORK CITY

THE HAND OF DRACULA

Copyright © 1973 by Lyle Kenyon Engel

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof.

A Pinnacle Books original, published for the first time anywhere.

First printing, June 1973

Printed in the United States of America

PINNACLE BOOKS, INC.

275 Madison Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10016

*When they—they come and wrench apart
His living life, his pulsing heart,
Then I, his slave, at his last cry
Myself each time begin to die,
The process moving toward its end
Until I find the one to send,
The one who'll come, the one who'll take
From my Black Lord the killer stake.*

THE RUNES OF KTARA

CHAPTER 1

By day, the rolling streets of San Francisco, with ~~their~~ sparkling brightness that bespeaks gentle living ~~and~~ human civilization, cheer both resident and visitor alike. It is a modern city with the rare quality to inspire the love-of-place with which one suspects the ancient Greeks regarded their communities. A New Yorker or a Chicagoan may say that he "loves" his town, but on closer examination you will find that what he finds attractive are two or three aspects of these cities—the night life, perhaps, or the electric feeling of life that pulses in the veins which cross-hatch between the great business buildings. And you will find also that, for every two or three aspects they find attractive about their towns, the New Yorker and the Chicagoan—under questioning—must eventually admit to at least two or three additional aspects that they find next to intolerable. Indeed, the closest thing resembling the San Franciscan's love for his city, is the Midwesterner's attachment to his small community; yet the latter is often heard to complain that, to do anything that's "cultured" or "modern," he has to travel to the nearest big city.

San Franciscans do not say things like that. They have it all—by their reckoning, at least, and the view-

points of most visitors agree. San Francisco has it all. The warmth of man to man, the warmth of nature. The only real exception is on those nights when something peculiar happens to the atmosphere. The fog, by itself, has little of the ghostly overtones of a dense London or New York City fog. Chilling, it has the ability to fall almost in sheets, which turn an otherwise only slightly uncomfortably humid evening into a shivering hydrosphere. Though it descends suddenly upon ill-prepared wearers of light suits, there is nothing frightening about it. In fact, such an event can take the walker off the streets and into the pleasant company of his fellow human beings whom he joins in a pleasantly decorated bar. No, the fog by itself is not at all frightening.

But on certain nights, when the atmosphere seemed to contain a wetness so cold almost to chill the very marrow of the bone, when even the light from street-lamps can't reach from one to the other through the dense thickness, then deep inside even the most hardy man who may find himself in deserted or unfamiliar parts of town, there comes a feeling of uneasiness. A feeling that something malevolent is moving through the streets; a feeling that one had best walk more rapidly to one's destination—if one can find it at all. And, finally, a feeling of thankfulness to whatever good spirits have brought one to one's destination, and one is again within a brightly lighted place among familiars. For, when that fog which is densest rolls in from the west, even the most unimaginative mind finds it difficult to be persuaded that it does not consume all

things in its path. When retreating to safety, time is of the very essence.

Derek Williams was aware that he was running out of time.

Nervously, he checked his watch. Nine-fifteen. He wondered whether or not he should order another beer. He'd only partly consumed his first. Not that he didn't like beer. He did, very much. It was just that he hadn't gotten completely over the way the round Chinese bartender had looked at him when he'd sat down on the stool. Like, he was thinking that maybe this kid isn't old enough to drink in public. And sure enough, when he gave his order—

"You got a draft card? I hope you ain't burned it, because we're not about to lose the liquor license, you ken?"

"I ken," Derek had responded, and flushing red he showed him the card. He'd wanted to tell the fat Chink with the lousy English just what he could do with his liquor license, but that would get him nowhere. He had a job to do here, and calling undue attention to himself was not a good idea. But just because he had the kind of baby face that made him look like somebody's fourteen-year-old brother, was no reason why he had to go through this humiliation everytime he wanted a simple lousy beer. Just the same, he cooled it. He even smiled when the big Chink nodded and turned to draw the holy brew he was charged with dispensing—but only to those who had passed the honorable age.

Nine-fifteen. And the decision. Should he order a

points of most visitors agree. San Francisco has it all. The warmth of man to man, the warmth of nature. The only real exception is on those nights when something peculiar happens to the atmosphere. The fog, by itself, has little of the ghostly overtones of a dense London or New York City fog. Chilling, it has the ability to fall almost in sheets, which turn an otherwise only slightly uncomfortably humid evening into a shivering hydrosphere. Though it descends suddenly upon ill-prepared wearers of light suits, there is nothing frightening about it. In fact, such an event can take the walker off the streets and into the pleasant company of his fellow human beings whom he joins in a pleasantly decorated bar. No, the fog by itself is not at all frightening.

But on certain nights, when the atmosphere seemed to contain a wetness so cold almost to chill the very marrow of the bone, when even the light from street-lamps can't reach from one to the other through the dense thickness, then deep inside even the most hardy man who may find himself in deserted or unfamiliar parts of town, there comes a feeling of uneasiness. A feeling that something malevolent is moving through the streets; a feeling that one had best walk more rapidly to one's destination—if one can find it at all. And, finally, a feeling of thankfulness to whatever good spirits have brought one to one's destination, and one is again within a brightly lighted place among familiars. For, when that fog which is densest rolls in from the west, even the most unimaginative mind finds it difficult to be persuaded that it does not consume all

~~things~~ in its path. When retreating to safety, time is ~~of the~~ very essence.

Derek Williams was aware that he was running out ~~of time~~.

Nervously, he checked his watch. Nine-fifteen. He ~~pondered~~ whether or not he should order another ~~beer~~. He'd only partly consumed his first. Not that he ~~didn't~~ like beer. He did, very much. It was just that ~~he~~ hadn't gotten completely over the way the round Chinese bartender had looked at him when he'd sat ~~down~~ on the stool. Like, he was thinking that maybe ~~this~~ kid isn't old enough to drink in public. And sure enough, when he gave his order—

"You got a draft card? I hope you ain't burned it, because we're not about to lose the liquor license, you ~~ken~~?"

"I ken," Derek had responded, and flushing red he showed him the card. He'd wanted to tell the fat Chink with the lousy English just what he could do with his liquor license, but that would get him nowhere. He had a job to do here, and calling undue attention to himself was not a good idea. But just because he had the kind of baby face that made him look like somebody's fourteen-year-old brother, was no reason why he had to go through this humiliation everytime he wanted a simple lousy beer. Just the same, he cooled it. He even smiled when the big Chink nodded and turned to draw the holy brew he was charged with dispensing—but only to those who had passed the honorable age.

Nine-fifteen. And the decision. Should he order a

second beer or not? The fat slob had been looking at him ever since he'd served the first draft. Such a simple thing, this little task he had to do, and Derek was going to blow it! Well, if he blew it, it wouldn't be for lack of trying. He drained the mug.

"Hey—another beer. And can I get some food up here?"

The bartender nodded yes. "Just egg rolls and fan-tails. But there's an almost empty dining room out there."

Derek followed the yellow man's eyes. No. That wouldn't do. It would be easier, sure, but he had his instructions.

"No. Let me have a couple of egg rolls. I'll have them here."

The bartender did not appear overly pleased. Derek suspected why; and hoped he was right. He was. With a mutter about how the waitresses were out there all sitting on their fan-tails, he walked to the end of the bar and pushed open the sideway. An instant later he was down the little hall and out of sight, no doubt passing his customer's order on to the chef at the far end of the counter window.

Derek pulled two dollars from his wallet and placed them on the bar top. Wheeling on the bar-stool, he grasped a triangular object from the counter and shoved into his pocket. Then he bolted for the door. He did not stop running until he'd turned the nearest corner and covered two full blocks. Then, panting, he slowed to a halt. With a sigh of relief, he pulled the triangular object from his pocket. It was ceramic of some kind, no matter how strangely fash-

ioned—Derek didn't care. The important thing was that he had it. Very important, but very stupid, too. Under a streetlight, which barely illuminated the area below, he looked at the white ceramic with the red writing which, on all three sides, declared that the Ho Wai Oriental Restaurant was at such and such a place and could be telephoned at such and such a number, and that the establishment offered "Chinese Cuisine with the Gourmet Touch." The top of the triangle was, of course, hollow. But what else could one expect from a common white ceramic ashtray?

The ashtray went back into the pocket. Again Derek Williams checked his watch. Almost nine twenty-five. Time. Maybe he'd have enough. But only if he hurried. He debated whether to try to find a cab, but the streets seemed empty of all vehicles; in fact, empty of all life whatsoever except himself. He knew the general area of town he should head for, and maybe, he hoped, if he was lucky he could pick up a cab between locations. In any case, on foot he might discover another place he could use—he wasn't restricted to any single one.

As he began his steady trot through the dimly lighted streets, he zippered up his jacket to ward off the cold. The jacket was imitation leather and underneath he wore a crewneck sweater. The combination should have been more than sufficient to ward off the cold of any normal October night, but this was not a normal October night, and the realization of that fact was slowly dawning on Derek Williams. It was—well, *creepy*. But that was something he did not want to admit to himself. What he'd accomplished so far was

difficult enough, without letting thoughts like that take over his imagination.

Especially considering the nature of the next place he would be visiting.

He ran southward along Kearney until he came to California, where he turned east for the one block that brought him to the corner that intersected Montgomery. Very odd. Still he had seen no one in the streets—no cars, no people. Eerie. He shrugged off the thought and, as his legs turned him in a southward direction on Montgomery, he found they were moving along at a slightly swifter pace.

The four blocks from California to Market Street were peopled by two human beings, neither of which was reassuring. One was a drunk using a gray stone wall for support. The other was a bony hag, an ancient woman who stood in the center of the sidewalk, immobile, and leaning on her cane. She stared at him as he approached and passed. Even after he was a block beyond her, he could somehow feel her eyes upon him, burning into his back. The sweat was accumulating in pools just above his beltline right there, where he thought he felt her eyes, and which seemed warmer than the rest of his body.

Foolish. Stupid. Yet he felt it. He did not have the courage to turn around and see, once and for all, if it was just his imagination or if she really was looking at him.

She was not, but such is man's imaginative facility that on dim and threatening nights all things seem possible.

At the Market Street intersection, he again turned

eastward—or more precisely, northeastward. While the route he had chosen was inefficient in terms of reaching the one establishment he knew about at the far end of the street, there was always the possibility that he might not have to go that far—that there might be another place which would do quite as well for his purposes.

Two blocks down Market, he ran out of breath. Again very strange, not only was he not a smoker, but he had also run a little track in his high school days. College did not leave enough time for sports, but he did do nightly calisthenics to keep his body in a semblance of its old shape. It obviously was the sudden cold, the wet cold that his lungs were not used to, which slowed him down. Nonetheless, he kept up a fast-paced stride.

Time: nine fifty. Short of time as well as breath. A sudden thought jarred his mind and his hand instinctively jumped to his jacket pocket. He sighed with relief. The ashtray was still there. If it had fallen out of his pocket as he'd run—if it had shattered to fragments—

But it had not. It was still there. He checked two other pockets. In one was a paperback book titled *Song of Satan*. Good. In another, a salt shaker. Good. But not so good. His fingers told him that the cap had loosened, and some of the salt had spilled from its container. A new chill went through him. Spilled salt meant bad luck. Unless—yes—one had to throw some of it over his left shoulder. Or was it the right shoulder? *Which?*

Taking no chances, he threw grains of salt over

both his shoulders. Nine fifty. One more thing to get, the one that would complete the list. He had till eleven, but—

Then he saw it. On the side street off to his right, in red neon script the glowing sign proclaimed the unmistakable words:

YORGE'S FUNERAL HOME

Derek Williams stopped. It was not the funeral parlor he'd intended to visit, but this one probably would do as well.

The thought was an unfortunate one for Derek Williams, but in his position, he could hardly be expected to know. Even though such knowledge might be, and was, a matter of life and death.

He turned down the collar of his jacket to make his appearance more acceptable. For the same reason he combed his hair and used a handkerchief to mop his brow. Now let us view the dead, he thought, and as he did so, he shivered. The cold night, that's what it was. Sure. Only a fool would be afraid of a bunch of corpses and people crying over them, right?

He didn't bother to answer the question. He simply pushed open the door and entered the vestibule of the funeral parlor.

Plush royal purple carpeting met his feet as soft lighting, the overpowering scent of flowers, and muted organ music met his other senses. He found himself in a long hallway off which were several rooms, each marked by a sign in a hand-scrolled script reminiscent of the neon outside, elaborately proclaimed the names of the corpses who reclined in plush, satin-lined display in each of the rooms.

“May I be of assistance to you, young sir?”

He had not realized how far down the hallway he was until he heard the voice wash over him from behind. It was a voice that somehow blended itself with the other components of the place, containing the lilt of the flowers, the somberness and reverential tone of the taped organ. And as Derek Williams turned to face the speaker, he saw that the man himself fit into his surroundings.

He was tall, well over six feet, and very slender, almost to the point of bone-thinness. Thin, too, were the long tapered fingers of his hands, which were interlaced before his hollow stomach. Supposed to be a prayerful attitude, it looked more like a Chinese-puzzle position from which the player was now supposed to extricate himself. His face also was thin, with a long crooked nose that seemed to dip below the level of his thin-lipped, taut mouth. Below his sparse head of hair and pallide, longated brow, his eyes were set back deeply in their sockets and appeared to have little life in them. If he had not been standing, so clearly awaiting a response to his question, Derek Williams would have thought him a corpse—a thought which might well have come to him regardless of his present location.

“I asked if I might aid you,” the man repeated.

“Er, yes. It’s Mr. Tracey.” Mr. Tracey was named prominently on the sign displayed before the second door to the left.

“Ah. Are you a relative or a friend of the family?”

“I’m, er, a friend of Mr. Tracey, the deceased.”

“Excellent. Would you come with me, please? The

the displays and wreaths set at the head and foot of the casket, probably came compliments of Yorge's Funeral Home. Between them was a silver cross and flanking them were two silver candlesticks, each containing a lighted white candle.

It hadn't occurred to him that such candles would be difficult to reach—and light! How was it possible to—

But they were, after all, just common everyday candles. Or so they seemed. But where at this hour could he buy a candle like that? Buy one? No, that wouldn't be right. On the other hand, a place like this wasn't the only place you could find a candle like that. Any church, for example, would . . .

"You just don't know him, do you?"

Derek Williams was startled almost to the point of crying out. She stood at his right, and she was not alone. She had brought all of the vultures with her.

Vultures, that was the word. That's what each of them, even the young girl, looked like. All of them no doubt had fed on Mr. Frank Tracey all the years he knew them, and now that he was beyond caring what they said or what they thought, their beady eyes were casting about for someone else, and there was no one but himself in the room.

He turned his involuntary shudder into an attempt to shake off the weird thoughts. Looking at the four-some again, he tried to see their features as normal, but he could not. They simply did not *look* normal.

"This is my mother, Mrs. Harkes, and my sister, Gladys Harkes, and this of course is Miriam. She says she doesn't know you from school."

"No, we haven't met before," he said. He turned sharply and sighed with relief. The doorway was empty. "I really must be going. It's late. I just wanted to—"

"Pay your last respects, yes. Frank was so fond of young people. Why, often he would say to me . . ."

But Derek Williams couldn't wait to hear exactly what it was Frank Tracey often would say to his fat, frowsy wife. He had to get out of this room before the combination of her and her relatives and the organ music and the smell of flowers made him sick to his stomach. The candle would have to come from a church if he could find one.

Immediately he found something else.

The hallway was empty.

Perhaps in one of the other rooms . . .

But a brief inspection showed that the situation in those was exactly as it had been in the other. Those which were in use, that is. Two of the rooms flanking the closed door at the end of the corridor were empty, their interiors black as pitch. Perhaps within one of them . . .

He was frightened to enter one of the black rooms. His heart pounding, he just as suddenly did enter one, that to the right of the door at the end of the hall, the door which was slowly opening.

He made it just in time. Squeezing in between the open door and the wall behind it, he could tell there were at least two people now out in the hall, although only one was speaking. His words were spoken in the soft macabre tones of the tall thin man who had accosted him earlier. The person to whom he spoke

seemed not to answer except for the issuance of an animal-like grunt. He wondered what sort of human being would make that kind of sound. He did not wonder for very long.

Irregular steps approached his place of concealment. There was an almost inaudible click and the room was bathed in bright light from ceiling-high fluorescent tubes. More footfalls moving into the room—one foot placed down, and dragging the other behind it. Derek Williams knew that the safest thing for him to do was to stay exactly where he was, leaving the full-open door as a barrier between himself and the other person in the room. But suddenly he was overpowered by curiosity mingled with the certainty that this other person was somehow not normal. Thus it was that he quietly shifted his stance so that his eyes could see around the door.

He saw two things simultaneously. The first made him curse himself for his inaction. There, on a shelf on the far wall, were four candlesticks each with a used candle. For an instant the thought crossed his mind that as soon as the man now at the end of the room departed, it would be an easy thing to grab one and then leave this place. But that hope was dashed as candles and candlesticks were scooped from the shelf and placed in the burlap bag which was carried by—

By the second thing Derek Williams saw.

In his thoughts he had used the word *man*, but it was not entirely appropriate. From the rear the huge hunchbacked creature, although definitely male, looked more like a deformed ape. Bent over as he was, it was hard to assess just how tall he might have

stood if his back were straightened, but the length of those arms were an indication, as their fingertips almost reached the soft pile carpeting on the floor. From his vantage point, Derek Williams could not see the man's face, or much of his head which, except for an untamed crop of black hair, was buried in the largest pair of shoulders he'd ever seen. As the hunchback performed his work in a tedious and studied way, he would now and then utter a soft grunt or growl. The effect was not settling to the mind of Derek Williams.

As the huge creature began to turn, the young man again moved completely behind his cover. And now the shuffling of the feet moved toward him as the hunchback coaxed his body in the direction he desired to move. Just as the sounds grew their loudest, just as the hunchback reached the doorway, the footfalls stopped. A grunt which almost sounded questioning.

Derek Williams fought to keep inside him the breath he had been holding for at least the last twenty seconds. His lungs were rebelling against this cruel treatment; his eyes were burning from the perspiration which dripped from his brow; his ears were pounding from the blood pulsing through his head and the echoes of the animal-like breathing on the other side of the door.

Thirty seconds, thirty-five.

Does the creature sense I'm here?

Then a mental sigh of relief as the lights were extinguished. Then, after two more lung-straining seconds in which he heard the shuffling move from the doorway out into the corridor, a rush of exhaled breath.

Derek Williams still did not move. Listening, he heard the door at the end of the corridor open and close. Immediately it opened again. More shuffling, then other feet. Then the voice of the hand-wringing skeleton. Then both of them moving toward the front end of the hallway. Derek Williams felt his heart gripped by an icy hand. He knew that his chance had been given to him. He knew that it had to be now or never.

Obviously the room at this end of the hall was a workplace and storage place for flowers and all the paraphernalia which made up the morose decor of this house of the dead. Obviously that was the place he could find his candle. There were two considerations, however, which were not obvious. The first was that he couldn't be sure he could make it from his present hiding place to the workrooms and back, without being detected either by the floorwalker-type or the hunchback. The second was that he couldn't be sure they were the only two members of the establishment—there might be someone else back there!

Excuses, Derek thought to himself. *Number one, you've got to come out of hiding soon anyway. Number two, you can always tell anybody who catches you that you got lost.* He almost laughed to himself. Who would believe that he could get lost in a place like this? But what could they do—have him arrested? What law had he broken really? But still there was the feeling he could not shake, that if he were caught, they might do something to him other than merely call the police.

Nonsense. It was just this place—and the kind of night it was. That was all.

He slipped from behind the door, moved around its bulk, and peered out into the hall. Empty! Quickly now he crossed the small space in the corridor between the doorway he had stood in and the other, closed, door. *What if it's locked?* But it wasn't. It was quickly opened and closed, and Derek Williams was on the other side.

At first he could see nothing in the darkness, but as his eyes accustomed themselves, he could see that he was standing in some kind of entryway lined by shelves on both sides. From the other side of a flimsy, almost see-through curtain that separated this area from the room or rooms beyond, a weak light source made everything visible a ghostly pale gray yellow.

Quickly he inspected the shelves. They held only a number of tools and bottles and jars which were in various states of being filled with vile-looking liquids. No candles. He would have to go farther inside.

Something about the curtain made him not want to touch it, but unclenching his fists, he did so and stepped inside. Here he was confronted with a large room, lined by work benches which contained more tools, bottles and a number of electrical gadgets. On the very far wall, he saw what he was looking for. Just to the left of the single source of illumination—a battered-looking goose-neck lamp—was the burlap bag the hunchback had been carrying, and to the left of that was a stack of white candles. His goal was in sight. But so was something else, something—or things—disconcerting.

Between himself and the candles, the floor was covered with caskets. There were at least a dozen of them, most of which were closed. But three were open. If they contained bodies—bodies which had not yet been made cosmetic through the tricks of mortuarial science. . . .

But this room wouldn't be empty forever. So move it, Derek!

He began working his way through the maze, aware that he should hurry, but somehow unable to move swiftly among these artifacts of the dead. If he allowed his legs or his arms to brush against one of these long boxes his insides would freeze, and the panicked scream that had been building up within him for what seemed hours would finally find its loud and revealing release. His slow and cautious movements were dictated as well by his need to keep his eyes averted from those caskets whose lids were not closed. If one of them did contain a lifeless body, he did not want to see it. He reached the workbench successfully.

His hand reached out and grasped the candle and he turned to make his way back among the boxes. As he did so, he noticed something shimmering in the reflection of the lamplight. It was coming from one of the open coffins, as if what lay inside was sending him a signal in code. He tried to take his eyes from it, but somehow couldn't. It was like whatever—or whoever—was beckoning him, asking him to come nearer, closer.

And suddenly he realized that his feet had indeed unconsciously carried him closer to that open box.

His heart skipped a beat as he tried again to wrench his eyes from the reflected light. But it was no use. Now he could see the jeweled ring that had sent him his message. Now he could see the almost flawless hand that wore it. And now he could *see*—

The girl was in her mid-twenties at most. Her nude body looked to be as flawless as the hand he had originally seen. But there were three things unique about this dead girl's corpse. One was its position. It did not lie in graceful repose as one expects to see the dead. The second was the way her face was stretched into an open-eyed, open-mouthed visage that, surrounded by the long, tousled blonde hair, looked to be nothing less than an eternally silent scream. And then there was the third thing:

The hemp noose that was locked tightly around the dead girl's throat.

Derek Williams dropped the candle he had been clutching. It hit the wooden floor and rolled against a casket to the rear. But he was not conscious of these things. He could only stare down at the coffin before him. Something from within him sounded its warning.

Get away from here—now!

But it was too late.

As his eyes flashed to the curtain which was the first block to his exit, he saw that he was not alone in the room of the dead. He had not seen the hunchback's face before. Now that he could see the cruel twist of those features, he knew that his first impression that this creature was more animal than man had been correct.

The hunchback stood in the entryway, the pulled-back curtain still in his huge hand. He made no move toward the interloper, but only grunted. Then he stepped into the room, but off to the side as if to let another pass.

The skeletal man's face appeared furious. Then his features relaxed.

"Young man, it is most unfortunate you saw fit to enter this place. Most unfortunate."

It was then that the hunchback advanced.

CHAPTER 2

On the other side of the continent, on the southern edge of Long Island, a giant of a man, in his early thirties, carried a back-breaking load of firewood into an old but recently refurbished mansion, the grounds of which backed onto the bay at Westhampton.

The bay was quiet this night, its surf calm, and the forecast predicted that it would remain so for the next two days at least. The forecast also had mentioned cooler than usual temperatures, and in that regard had been right on target. Irrespective of the modernization, the thirty-five-room manor and its outbuildings had gone through, there was no way for the most up-to-date heating system to take the chill completely from the old stone walls. The size of the three-story house, and the tall pines which surrounded it—by day keeping out what otherwise might be the roof-warming rays of the sun, while by night holding in the bone-chilling water-drenched air from the bay—effected to keep it continually damp and cold.

There were fires blazing in three of the great stone hearths of the main house. But on the first floor, the huge man unburdened himself of his load of firewood before the fireplace that formed a full third of one wall of the large booklined den. As he knelt to place

three logs on the already glowing blaze, his dark eyes blinked from the intense heat. But the warmth felt especially welcome on his cheeks and smooth, bald head. In the strong contrasts of light and dark caused by the shifts in the firelight, the man's smooth face and head resembled a flawless carving of ivory or jade, fashioned in the likeness of some powerful demon of another world.

Cameron Sanchez stoked the new logs and satisfied himself that the newly added wood would catch correctly. He was aware that one of the two other people in the room was watching him, but he remained kneeling in front of the blaze in order to allow its heat to remove from within him that chill which he doubted even his being consumed by the flames might take away.

"You most likely are correct," the woman said. "The innate knowledge of your innermost self can scoff at your human machinations to deny what is reality and to counter its effects."

She of course had read his thoughts, but he had become used to that by now. No, not used to it; perhaps he never would become so. He had accepted the fact of this woman and the powers that were hers. He knew without looking that her beautiful oval face now displayed a half-mocking smile. It normally accompanied a regal and lofty tone of voice.

"You are, you know, the perfect picture of the savage as you sit there worshiping the flame. How proud men are of what they call civilization, yet it takes so very little to reduce them to what they were in the times when caves were their only habitats."

Cam Sanchez moved back from the hearth and took up a seated position, cross-legged, on the floor. He directed his eyes to the wing chair in which the woman sat gracefully, with her legs curled under her. Much like a cat would sit.

Which was very appropriate, he thought, as her yellow green eyes seemed to consume his. A sleek creature was this woman, her black hair shining in the firelight, her black cloak tight around her body—a body that had to be perfection, he knew, but as she had made very clear to him, a body that he might have no aspirations of possessing. She was, he knew full well, possessed already.

But he dropped the thought. He did not like to think of that other being who resided in the manor.

She seemed in a mood to talk for a change. He found no reason not to indulge her. Though he had not thought of it precisely before, he knew the answer to his question before he asked it:

“Those fires of the cavemen, you saw them?”

The woman, who called herself Ktara and who looked to be no older than her late twenties, smiled. “Those fires and the fires of many races of man down through the ages. Always the same reverence, always the same thoughts. Yours is not a terribly variable species, Mr. Sanchez.”

“And yours? Is, was, yours so variable? Did you not stand in awe of what you considered to be . . .”

“We stood in awe of the Source, yes. And the All.”

“And the Old Gods; how about them?”

His reference was to a set of lines in a book he had read months ago. The book was called *The Runes of*

Ktara, and the lines spoke of those gods and what had happened to that place which legends called Atlantis or Eden or other names less widely known:

*The first land I remember well.
It rose in fire, in ashes fell.
But we, my Master and his slave,
Escaped the sea whose waters craved
All life on that past continent
Whose time the Old Gods cried was spent.*

“And,” he added to his question, “what about those final fires? It would be surprising if no one stood in awe of them.”

Her eyes appeared to be looking past him, past the wall beyond, and through ages long since dead.

“Awe is not the word one has for that which extinguishes life. Terror, yes. But terror can be elicited from even the most commonplace things. If the roof of this house were to fall, you would not feel *awe* concerning that collection of beams and shingles. Yet in the moment before its final crushing descent it would inspire fear or terror. No, the fire which consumed that first home was as commonplace to its inhabitants as this roof is to you. It did not inspire awe or wonder of any kind.”

“But the gods?”

“Ah. They too, were familiar beings. They too, were feared. Some of those who dwelt in the land of my birth held them in awe, yes.”

Cam nodded. “Maybe things might have turned

out differently if respect for your gods had been more widespread.”

The woman turned to the third person in the room, the elderly silver-haired man who sat at the desk across the room. He had been sorting out a number of newspaper clippings, but for the last few moments he had been listening to the conversation behind him.

“And what is your opinion about that, Professor Harmon?”

Damien Harmon grasped the rims of his wheelchair and unhurriedly turned the device so that he faced into the room. He had been slumping down into the seat, and now he used the strength of his bull-like shoulders to lift his lower body into a more upright position. His lower body had had no independent movement of its own since the year 1938, when a lead pipe had crushed his lower spinal column. The same lead pipe was responsible for the metal plate which, for more than thirty years, had cupped around the frontal lobes of his brain.

Yet the vicious attack upon his person had not affected the clarity of thought of this hawk-faced man who, before he had reached his mid-twenties, had achieved doctorate degrees in ancient literature and medieval philosophy and a master's degree in physics. Other pursuits in the intellectual realm included full doses of subjects ranging from biochemistry and psychosociology to archaeology and lost languages.

At twenty-five, Damien Harmon had taken on the job of special assistant to the commissioner of the New York City police, his job to apply his knowledge

of the then-new science of criminology. It was supposed to be strictly an office job, but Damien Harmon, against orders, took to "the field." His present physical condition was the direct result and he was fired from his job.

But the combination of his brains and extreme wealth led him, first, into an active college teaching career and second, after his retirement at age forty, into an even more active career of private crime-fighting. To aid him, he had employed a series of able young men. The latest was Cameron Sanchez, whose abilities as a patrolman in Spanish Harlem had moved the syndicate to frame him on a drug-possession charge. His suspension from the force could not be prevented, but Damien Harmon's lawyers saved the remarkably huge Puerto Rican from a jail sentence. He had been Harmon's assistant for the three years since. He specialized in the heavy work—or had, until the professor had acquired his latest instrument.

"I asked your opinion, Professor," the woman said.

"I know," he said quietly. "I also know that it is not very productive for me to have any opinions on the subject you discuss. Naturally, I am curious as to the facts, but since only you, and of course your Master, are aware of the actualities, my opinions mean next to nothing."

The woman called Ktara smiled and looked back to Cam. "As I have had cause to mention to you before, you have much to learn from your employer, Mr. Sanchez." She then turned back to Harmon. "The hour grows late. Is it not time for my Master to feed?"

Cam's eyes returned to the fire in the hearth. The

cold that had almost gone from the pit of his stomach had returned.

The Black Master. Son of the Dragon. Two of the many names by which he had been known through the ages of man. Old Sumer, Ancient Egypt, Tibet, the land of the Aztecs, medieval and modern Europe. Writings from each of these civilizations carry references—some short, some extensive—testifying to his existence and to the fear with which he was regarded. Last in the line of names was the one he had used in nineteenth century Transylvania.

Dracula.

Dracula the vampire, a label the Count was not overly fond of. "The word is not entirely accurate," he had told Harmon, "but such I have been called for centuries—*vampire* or its equivalent—so I shall not dispute your use of the term if it makes my classification easier for you." In other words, it was a petty matter, one which a being with the Count's powers found beneath his attention. Most of the dealings of man he found beneath his attention.

Cam watched him now as, in the booklined study, he toyed with a glass of sherry. He had fed downstairs, in the basement laboratory where his earth-filled coffin rested, fed from the synthetic blood the Professor had concocted, a synthetic the components of which satisfied the vampire's need for sustenance, but only barely. It was human blood his system craved, and he had made very plain that should Harmon's control over him falter—just once—the blood

which would satisfy him would be that of the professor. And that of his assistant.

The two-part relay control system had not yet failed, not since its first real test in the crypt in the passageway under Castle Dracula. But it had only been a couple of months since the solenoid-linked system had been in place, part of it within the professor's body, part of it next to the vampire's heart.

Its workings were simple. Harmon, through hours of concentrated practice, had developed sufficient telekinetic skill to move small objects with his mind. Implanted within him was a device which emitted a tiny wave of energy which would cease under two conditions—if his heart stopped beating involuntarily, in other words if he should die, or if he mentally shifted a control lever. The second implant, the one next to Dracula's heart, received the energy wave which held in check, much like an arrow in a bent bow, a tiny sliver which had been taken from the stake Harmon and Cam had removed from the vampire's heart. When the signal from Harmon's implant ceased abruptly, a small energy conversion took place which, using the heat of Dracula's own blood, sent the splinter-shaft into the Count's heart. The splinter remained in place except for those times when the vampire fed—and when Harmon wished the Count to be conscious.

There had been only one hitch to this system, which even Dracula admitted was ingenious. The cell within the professor required periodic recharging, and the equipment needed to build the recharger had been stolen. They had recovered the equipment, but

barely in time. Recovery had been swift—and disastrous to the criminal syndicate involved.*

It was the newspaper accounts of the aftermath which Harmon had been rereading at his desk. He extended the clippings to the Count, whose dark eyes merely scanned the headlines:

**MYSTERY SURROUNDS WIPE-OUT
OF STOLEN-GOODS OPERATION**

**MOB WAR BREAKS OUT
IN BROOKLYN, QUEENS**

**ARSON SUSPECTED IN BLAZE
DESTROYING GANGSTER'S
MANSION IN QUOGUE**

**POLICE BAFFLED BY SUDDEN END
OF FRANK ANTHONY ORGANIZATION**

**ANTHONY MOB LIEUTENANT CLAIMS
BOSS SPOKE OF VAMPIRES
ON NIGHT OF DEATH**

The Count smiled, his thick eyebrows arching to reflect the slight amusement of a cultured nobleman at one of his servant's jokes. And benevolent indeed did his face look at the moment. But both Cam and Harmon had seen that face when the sleek black hair

*See *Dracula Returns!*, Number One in the Dracula Horror Series

moved down the high-arched forehead, as its nostrils flattened and lips drew back from teeth which were no longer human teeth but animal fangs. They had seen those eyes which were now employed peacefully reading, turn from their dark neutrality into blood-red suns with white, searing centers. And they had ample evidence that the physical strength of his normally powerful body, larger than the steel-muscled Puerto Rican, was but a tenth of the real power he could muster in body *and* mind.

He returned the clippings to Harmon. His accent was thick and deep as he commented upon their significance to him:

"Did you really think I might be interested in what your journalists have to say? Or, indeed, in what further events evolved from your little adventure?"

Harmon placed the newspaper articles in a brown manila folder which he then placed into a desk drawer.

"My little adventure? You are leaving out the important part you played."

"Your adventure," the Count repeated. "I was but a convenient tool in your game. As you are well aware, it was not a matter of my choosing."

"Nor will it be next time," Harmon said levelly.

"If, Professor. If there is a next time. I take no interest in your petty definitions of good and evil and the actions you engage in on the behalf of one against the other. I live according to my own sense of these matters."

"You live," Harmon countered, "according to *my* sense of your usefulness to me."

Dracula's smile widened. "Nobly said, Professor Harmon." He turned to the woman seated across the room. "And you, my sweet, what do his innermost thoughts tell you?"

"Very little. As usual the metal plate blocks the flow of thought between our minds."

"And the other one?" A gesture toward Cam.

"He does not share his employer's sense of bravado, Master."

"And yourself, little one?"

A pause, during which her eyes focused upon her own hands. "I do as I do. I do as I have done, those things which the Fates dictate I must."

"I was speaking of Professor Harmon's statement regarding control."

Another pause. "Control is a tenuous thing, Master. It also is complex. Who is to say when one entity controls another?"

Cam Sanchez smiled inwardly. It was a good response, and not as philosophic as it sounded. It was a fact that while the Count was in an active state, he could control her every move. But when he was not alive—or, more correctly, in that state of deathlike preservation—it was she who was in complete control, not only of her own actions but of him as well. Except even here, throughout the "cycles," as she called them, as soon as the vampire received the death stake in his breast, she began to age, slowly, but inexorably and uncontrollably. Her fate then was not her own, as her mission was decreed. The poetic lines of her *Runes* said it plainly:

*When they—they—come and wrench apart
His living life, his pulsing heart,
Then I, his slave, at his last cry
Myself each time begin to die,
The process moving toward its end
Until I find the one to send,
The one who'll come, the one who'll take
From my Black Lord the killer stake.*

She had “found the one” or ones, all right. Harmon and himself. She knew full well that it was the vampire’s custom to make his first resurrection meal on those she had sent to awaken him, and yet, he suspected that in this “cycle” her motives might be different. They might well have given their blood to the Count had she not intervened at the point when their control seemed doubtful. She had given no reason for her intervention other than whim, but perhaps that was what *all* control depended upon—the whim of someone, or something, else.

At this point the Count’s voice snapped Cam’s attention to the present.

“It is a little late in the evening for visitors, is it not, Professor?”

Harmon’s expression was puzzled. “Visitors?”

Dracula nodded. “Visitor, I should have said. My seeress companion has told me you have one, or will have, as soon as she locates the proper driveway into your property. But, then, I suppose you do not mind if a visit by a close relative is unannounced.”

“She? A relative?”

Dracula rose from his chair, his eyes flashing an evil

leer for a brief moment as he towered over the three other occupants in the room.

"I shall take myself to another part of the house, Professor. I think this will be in accord with your wishes. Unless, of course, you are eager for me to meet the young lady which my Ktara tells me is a most lovely specimen of your American youth. Her name, I believe, is—"

"*Jennifer?*" Harmon's voice was incredulous. "*Jennifer here?*"

Cam now stood. Jennifer, Jenny Harmon, was the Professor's niece. She was in college out on the West Coast, or she was supposed to be. Cam had met her only twice, and the Count's description of her was pretty much on target. But what in blazes was she doing *here*? She had no business whatsoever . . .

Harmon's thoughts evidently were on the same wave length.

"Cam. Go out and find her. Then drive her back to the city, to our brownstone. Tell her I'll see her there tomorrow. Tell her anything, but she is not to be allowed to come inside this house!"

"Uncle Damien!"

She was, as the Count had said, an excellent example of girlish youth which, in its freshness, had not yet become fully woman. Even the thick sweater and jeans her willowy figure now wore, combined with her long but loose-hanging blonde hair, and her rosy cheeks suggested that this was Miss Young America. A further look into her finely chiseled face and her large

eyes might detect a trace of an aristocratic will. It was that will which Professor Harmon recalled as his niece crossed the fire-lit room to his wheelchair. He flashed a look at Cam who in turn shrugged with an "I tried" expression on his face. As the Puerto Rican exhaled with relief to see that their two guests were absent from the room, it was obvious to him that Harmon had decided to try again.

"Jennifer, I asked Cam to tell you—"

"He did, Uncle Damien, but I didn't feel I could take him up on his offer. Besides, I had to see you. It's urgent." She looked around the room fleetingly. "Uncle, you've simply done wonders with this place. I hope there's enough heat upstairs where I'll be sleeping for tonight. I've got to get back."

"A very nice shift of subjects, Jennifer."

"Thank you, Uncle. But I really must talk to you."

"And it cannot wait until morning?"

"No, it can't. I would have telephoned, of course, but then one does not reach Damien Harmon by telephone, does one?"

That was correct, although telephones had been installed in the Westhampton house, the first phones Harmon ever had allowed in any place he used as a dwelling. He hated the instruments which, for the most part, were nothing but devices to interrupt whatever it was he was doing. However, the phones at Westhampton were deemed necessary as to afford an additional means of communication between Cam and himself, should their special equipment fail for some reason. They were attached to special jacks, though, so that, unless Harmon was expecting a spe-

cial call, no ring signalled that someone was trying to reach him.

"Have you eaten, Jennifer?"

"To your mundane question, Uncle, I can answer unenthusiastically that I had a very mundane meal on the airplane. Please, may we talk?"

Cam made a move to leave the room. Jenny stopped him.

"No, please—you stay, too. I think I'll be needing your help just as much as Uncle Damien's."

Harmon sighed loudly. "Well, at least that's one concern I can scrap. If you're willing to discuss it before Cam, you can't very well be in the kind of *trouble* which first came to my mind."

Jenny's face turned red. "Uncle!"

Harmon spread his hands. "Modern living does take its toll that way, my dear. But congratulations, anyway."

"Please!"

"All right, Jennifer. I assume the problem is not money. Even if you hadn't all that much of your own, a simple wire would have been enough to secure what you might require of me."

"It is not money."

"Well, you can't very well expect my assistance if you've gotten yourself dismissed from school. Your grades are your business, and if you've become involved with one of those radical organizations on campus, that too, is your business. Although I can't imagine why a nice clean-cut girl of wealth like yourself would want to foster any kind of revolution."

"Uncle, I am a B-plus student and I am *not* advo-

cating even the overthrow of the California governorship!"

"That is good to hear, is it not, Cameron?" A wink accompanied this.

Cam grinned back. "Always comforting to know that one's upbringing has carried with it enough indoctrination so that one remains loyal to one's class, sire."

The light-hearted sarcasm of Cam's response was not lost upon the girl. Conversely, her sudden outbreak of tears was not lost upon either of the two men.

Correction: three men.

"Damien," Count Dracula said from the doorway. "Obviously, what we have here is the classic case of the damsel in distress." His voice had taken on the characteristics of milk and honey. "And a very pretty damsel, too, I might add."

Cam did not like the way the Count was looking at Jenny. He did not have an opportunity to register Harmon's reaction, as Dracula again spoke, this time directly to the girl.

"It is clear to me that what has brought you here is of the utmost urgency."

Jenny looked appreciative for his intervention. "Thank you."

An exaggerated bow. "Count Yula, at your service. A bit of old royalty that your uncle recently, shall we say, dug up. Now, if you would kindly be seated, your uncle and I would like to know just how we might be of assistance to you. Exactly what is it which forms your until-now insoluble problem?"

Jenny sat in one of the plush leather chairs of the study. Drying her tears with a handkerchief, she looked first to Cam, then to her uncle, then rested her eyes on the tall foreigner with the soothing voice. She answered his question in one word, a word that quickly got the attention of the other two men:

“Murder.”

CHAPTER 3

"Murder?"

Harmon's repetition of his niece's last word came after an interval of silence, a silence which resulted from a mild state of shock. At least, this was Cam's interpretation of the stunned look on his employer's face.

"Jennifer. Who has been murdered?"

"A boy at school, at Berkeley. At least, that's what the police say."

"She did not commit the crime, Professor Harmon."

Ktara's statement from the door of the library came into the room like an arrow. Harmon and Cam both reacted with a mixture of surprise and relief. Jenny, on her part—

"Uncle, you thought *I . . .*"

"Might be under suspicion, Jennifer," the professor hastily completed.

"She is not," Ktara replied.

It was now that Jenny looked up and took in the vision of the woman in black. When she returned her attention to Harmon, the question on her face was obvious.

Harmon did the honors. "Jennifer, this is Ktara. She is an associate of ours."

"Pleased to meet you," Jenny said.

"And I, you," Ktara responded.

Both voices were cool, without any evidence of emotion. At once it struck Cam that here were two women, both beautiful in their way, but beautiful in completely opposite ways. Ktara the female animal at its most highly developed form. Jenny the female human at what was close to its most highly developed form. It was hard to believe that such contrasting types ever could develop any kind of friendship. But then, from what he knew of Ktara, it was hard to imagine her in any kind of friend relationship.

The scrutiny of the two women of each other was broken by Harmon.

"Jennifer, there has been a murder and you are not suspected. Correct?"

"Correct."

"Then, may I ask why you felt an urgency to hop on a plane and then rent a car—I assume you rented it and didn't steal it from the airport—and insist that we speak tonight rather than in the morning? May I inquire that of you, Jennifer?"

"I know you have friends in police work."

"I'll admit to that. Go on. What was this murdered boy to you? A boy friend?"

"No, I hardly knew him. I only met him a couple of times when Roy . . ."

"Ah, Roy. And who might that be?"

Her face tightened. "Uncle Damien, I'll explain it all if you let me."

The Count smiled benignly. "Yes, Damien. Do let the young lady tell her story. Please, Jennifer."

"Thank you, Count Yula. Well, about a week or so ago Derek Williams, he's the boy the police say has been murdered, disappeared. He didn't go to any of his classes and he never showed up at his dorm at night. The school authorities checked with his parents in Omaha, I think; they had not seen or heard from him. His roommate says that all of his things still are there, that nothing is missing, and that Derek didn't mention anything about leaving school for even a short time. When the police were called in they picked up a story that Roy Ambers and Derek didn't get along and that Derek was afraid that Roy was going to hurt him for some reason. They picked up Roy for questioning and they haven't released him. They let me see him once, that's all."

Harmon considered. "You've left some holes in your story, but first one question. What is this Roy Ambers to you?"

"He's just a friend."

Cam grinned. "Professor, that wasn't very sensitive of you."

Jenny's eyes flashed hot. "I *said* just a friend, and that's what the relationship is!"

"All right," Harmon stepped in. "You say they're holding this boy Ambers. What's the charge?"

"I'm not sure there is any formal charge, but Roy said he thinks they're convinced Derek Williams is dead and that he killed him."

"Did he say why they're convinced of that?"

Jenny paused. "It has to do with . . . with the Family."

"Family," Harmon repeated.

"It's sort of a group, a commune which is camped on some land up in the Napa valley. This past summer, both Roy and Derek lived there for a while. That's where they met, and that's where there was trouble of some kind between them. Some of the others at Berkeley knew about it and they must have told the police."

"This trouble, what was it about?"

"I don't know. Roy wouldn't say, but I heard talk that it was really serious; that Roy had said he would get even with Derek."

"Kill him?" asked the Count.

"Yes, sir. Evidently. You see, both Roy and Derek left the commune at the same time. Neither of them said much about it, but the story is that they both quit or were expelled after they broke some solemn rule of the commune. It's a strange group at this place. One rumor has it that its some kind of drug cult, another says that its a witchcraft coven of some kind. You know, black magic."

"Yes, I know," the Count said. "But you're convinced that this lad Ambers is innocent."

"I *know* Roy, Count Yula! He could not kill anyone, no matter what he might have said."

Harmon's eyebrows raised. "Oh? Now you say that he actually said that he would kill this Williams?"

Jenny looked down at the clasped hands in her lap. "That's what the police say he said."

There was another pause. Finally Harmon asked Cam to show Jenny to one of the guest rooms.

"You must be tired, Jennifer. We shall talk more about this in the morning. There's really not much any of us can do about this problem tonight. Cam?"

In minutes Cam had taken Jenny's bag from the rented car and led her upstairs to one of the large bedrooms which had been furnished for guests. Not that there had been all that many guests in the manor, nor were all that many expected, but it was the professor's view that appearances should be kept up.

"Sleep well, Jenny," Cam said. After setting down her bag, he turned to go. She stepped into his path.

"Cam. You do believe me, don't you?"

"About your friend's innocence? Sure. Why shouldn't I?"

The look on her face was strange, something he couldn't read.

"Well, yes. That's what I meant, I suppose. And Uncle Damien, will he, and you, help Roy?"

"Your uncle had best answer that one, Jenny. I only work here."

"What about the Count, and that Ktara? An associate of yours, Uncle Damien said. Whose associate is she, Cam? Uncle's, the Count's or just yours?"

The question made Cam laugh. "*Mine?* Jenny, you couldn't be farther from reality if you tried!"

"In that case, good night, Cam."

She stepped aside. The conversation was obviously over, and there wasn't much else Cam could do except exit. He had the foolish feeling he didn't do so

very gracefully. In fact, he still was shaking his head as he hit the bottom landing.

He felt Ktara's eyes on him before he saw her.

"No, Mr. Sanchez. Please do not go into the study. My Master and yours are in deep discussion."

Cam started. If there was trouble . . .

"Mr. Sanchez. I said discussion, and that is the truth. If it were anything else, you could not prevent it, anyway. Could you?"

"I guess not, but I'd try."

"True." She smiled at him, it seemed a warm smile, but with this woman one could never tell for sure. "You know, you basically are a very simple man, Mr. Sanchez, although in your way quite vain. I am somewhat surprised that you are confused by what was said upstairs."

"Upstairs?"

"Just now with Harmon's niece. Do you not wonder why she was so curious about your relationship with myself? Did you not wonder why she took particular umbrage to your intimation that *her* relationship with this Roy Ambers was anything more than what she said it was, namely friendship?"

Cam looked at her warily. "What you're building up to—"

"Is quite obvious, isn't it? As is the actual state of things. The girl, quite obviously, has very strong feelings regarding you."

Cam laughed. "Jenny? She's a child! Sure, in the couple of times I've seen her over the past three years we've gotten along, and maybe she did show a little

bit that she admired me some, but all girls have their puppy loves.”

It was Ktara’s turn to laugh. “This *child* is now nineteen, Mr. Sanchez. And it is no schoolgirl romance, no idealization of some romantic white knight she sees in you. Precisely speaking, she is in love with you. What do you say to that?”

Cam did not answer the question. He merely smiled, and wondered what Damien Harmon would say to that!

At that moment Harmon was trying to read the unreadable expression on Count Dracula’s face as the flickering light of flames played with malicious angles.

“Count, I have difficulty in ascertaining just what it is you’re saying, knowing as I do your feelings about good and evil.”

Dracula’s smile was full to the point of leering; Harmon could almost imagine he saw the elongated fangs growing from the roof of his jaw.

“I merely asked you, Professor, whether or not you thought your niece to be intelligent and a good judge of character.”

“To which questions, I would answer yes.”

“Excellent. Then you would conclude that this Roy Ambers is innocent of the crime the authorities are trying to lay upon him.”

Harmon paused for just a second. “I suppose I would say that, yes.”

“Excellent again. I shall now get to the point of all this. It is a wager I wish to make with you, Harmon. A very serious wager, but then you are rather a gam-

bling man, are you not? You gambled already when you had the stake pulled from my heart, and then gambled again when you placed your powers against mine. Both times you won. I'm willing to gamble that you won't win a third time. For my wager, if I lose, I give you six full months of time in which I pledge my solemn word that I will follow your instructions to the letter, without trying to escape your control. Six full months, Harmon, in which you need not toss in your sleep at night wondering what havoc I might cause should I escape that control. A desirable prize, yes?"

"Continue."

"The wager is this. I will assist you and your niece in any way you direct. If she is correct, if her young man is proven innocent of the charge of taking this other young man's life, you win. But if you, with my help, cannot *prove* him to be innocent, if the police and your court system find him guilty of the charge, in that case *I* win. What do you say to my gambler's proposition?"

"You have more to say," Harmon replied.

"Indeed? Regarding what?"

"You've not yet mentioned what happens should you win. *Your* prize."

Dracula's features blurred just a little. The teeth *had* started to grow!

"Let us say, Harmon, that if you lose, I win—Jennifer, to begin with!"

Harmon suddenly chuckled. "Count, I'll consider your offer. I'll let you know shortly. First there are a few things more I must learn. I just recalled your ask-

ing me about Jennifer's judge of character. As I did, I recalled also that she seemed rather favorably disposed to *you*. So I've got to do some checking on my own. I'll let you know eventually."

Suddenly the Count rose to his feet. His change into his bestial self almost now complete, he raised his taloned hands high above his head.

"I said you shall say *now!*"

Harmon's eyes were closed for only a second, but it was enough. In that short passage of time, the white energy-finger within his mind touched the little lever buried in his side. The vampire screamed.

The Professor's opened eyes casually surveyed the body of Count Dracula which lay crumpled before him. He spoke softly:

"Eventually, Count. Eventually."

CHAPTER 4

Harmon put the proposition to Cam and Ktara later that same night. He was not surprised that Cam's agreement came quickly; he knew his young friend would welcome a couple of days or more away from Westhampton. He was a little surprised at Ktara's quick response.

"I would not have supposed you to be overly concerned with matters of family, Professor Harmon. It gives your character an added depth. But yes, I shall do as you request."

"You know why I'm asking, I suppose."

She looked at him steadily. "You mean aside from wanting to assist your Jennifer? Yes, Professor, I know why."

"Suppose we all know," Cam suggested.

Harmon told him. "It's six months, Cam. Think of it. Think of the freedom from concern."

"If you're right. If Jenny's right."

"That's why I'm sending you to California. You're a trained policeman, and Ktara . . . well, she has additional resources."

Cam agreed. "However, you've still got to consider whether the Count will keep his word. If we win, that is."

"I think we've had evidence enough that the word of Count Dracula is his bond. As for winning, Cameron, I do not intend to gamble unless I'm assured of winning. Therefore, it will be no gamble at all."

Cam did not like the way Ktara laughed.

The early morning flight from Kennedy to San Francisco International was direct and, for the most part, conversation-free. Aside from burying himself in a textbook on kinetics, Ktara's presence caused a damper on anything meaningful that Jenny might have wanted to direct toward Cam. Which suited Cam just fine. What Ktara had said about Jenny and him the evening before, was somewhat unsettling. Jenny was, after all, only a girl, much too young. Yet she was rapidly turning into a young woman, a well-developed and intelligent and . . .

Forget it, Cameron. Back to the book.

As it was, Cam had opted for a single seat in the two-seat-wide first-class compartment, which allowed the two women to sit together. Ktara immediately slipped into some kind of trancelike sleep, which left Jenny with nothing but either her college texts (she'd brought two with her) or the magazines proffered by the stewardesses. She finally settled for one of the texts. Cam saw it was an annotated edition of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Cam knew the long poem, not intimately, but well enough to know that it was a sympathetic treatment of the difficulties in which Satan found himself after his fall. The parallel, of course, was strong. No doubt the girl would "relate" to the Lord of Hell, just as she had "related" to the Count,

who was the Lord of Vampires, who had himself fallen from the grace of his Old Gods.

But neither was Cam a philosopher, so back to kinetics.

Upon landing, Cam put Jenny in a cab for Berkley. She was not eager to go back to school.

"Your job is to get back to your books. Mine is to look into Ambers' innocence, or guilt."

"But I can help!"

"Indeed. How?" When her answer was not swiftly forthcoming, he added. "Besides, I've got Ktara to help."

She looked at him steadily. She did not say it, but he knew precisely what she was thinking. *Yes, you've got Ktara!*

As the cab he had hailed for himself and Ktara pulled from the terminal, she commented, "It seems I am part of a love triangle. How easily these things happen, even to the most innocent."

Cam acknowledged. "I figured using your name that way would send her on her way. It did."

"It also seems you're getting to be a mind-reader yourself."

"Not me, ma'am. No, that's your specialty. That's why you're here."

Unfortunately Ktara's specialty was not to be very useful, as a result of the strict interpretation of a San Francisco precinct captain.

"No. Not *two* of you. I've got my instructions. One person, a Mr. Cameron Sanchez—he can visit with the prisoner. Just him. I don't have anything about any woman. I mean, I've got my instructions."

Cam knew where those instructions came from. Sanford Proctor was a long-time friend of Harmon's. Both had joined the New York Police force the same year, and both had kept in touch after Harmon had been discharged. Sandy Proctor was now in official retirement, but he still had connections. Exactly what kind of work he had been engaged in during his years of service Harmon wasn't sure about, mainly because his good friend Sandy had always been evasive concerning his "special" assignments. Harmon suspected that now and then his friend came out of retirement for one-shot jobs, but again had no proof. However, whenever he needed a bit of information or some small favor involving the police or city government, Proctor had proved to be of effective assistance. This permission to see the Ambers boy was a case in point. Unfortunately, it also was an example of communications getting tripped up along the way.

Their original game-plan called for Cam to question the boy and Ktara to act as a lie detector—a sensor of innocence or its opposite. But now the original game-plan would have to be scrapped.

Or would it?

"Cameron, please let's don't argue with the officer," she said. "He's only doing his job the way he sees fit." The look in her eye, however, said that she also was going to do hers. And suddenly Cam saw the obvious. It was the narrowing of her eyes and their taking on a bright green quality that communicated her idea. That plus her next statement.

"If you don't mind, I think I shall just stroll around outside."

With which, she smiled at Cam and the captain and exited. Cam noticed, but the captain did not, that she left the station door open just a crack.

He did the same to the door leading into the block of cells as he followed the captain. The policeman, in a confidential tone, expressed his opinion of the prisoner to Cam.

"I don't know what your interest in the kid is, but if you can get him to say anything to you it would be a help; probably a help to himself more than us, the way I figure it. He absolutely refuses to talk about where he was the night the Williams kid disappeared. Maybe he's, well, protecting some girl he was with, if you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean."

"Yeah. Well, anyway, if that's the case, maybe you can talk some sense into him. Our job isn't to go around getting fathers angry at their kids. We're trying to solve a murder."

Cam stopped. "Murder? Then I take it you've got a body?"

The captain turned. "That, Mr. Sanchez, is official business. I've got my instructions and they don't include letting you know the extent of the evidence we've got. I was told you can talk to Ambers, and that you can do. Two cells down on your right. I'll be outside at the desk when you've finished." He began to move back down the corridor. "But, let me say again, if you can get him to just talk?"

"That's what I'm here for, Captain," Cam said with a smile. "But I'm not sure if *my* instructions in-

clude passing on anything of substance to you. I'm certain you understand my position, yes?"

The captain walked off in a huff. Cam knew he had made a miscalculation when he heard the door at the end of the corridor slam. He wondered how good Ktara's reading ability was through stone walls.

Roy Ambers was good-looking in a young male way in the same respect that Jenny Harmon typified the young American girl. Slightly under six feet in height, he was built lean, but the bare arms and chest revealed by the absence of any covering, except for a suede vest, marked with American Indian designs, exhibited a fairly well-developed musculature. His clothing, plus the not-too-long, sandy-colored hair which fell over his forehead, gave this young man with the angular face just the right touch of youthful rebellion. There was but one aspect of Roy Ambers that suggested advanced age. The dark circles under his eyes. This was a lad who had something on his mind, something that caused sleepless nights.

A murder charge hanging over your head will do that, Cam reflected.

"My name is Sanchez." He extended his open hand through the bars.

"Cop?" Ambers' question sounded as if he were merely seeking confirmation of something that he really wasn't all that interested in, something of relatively minor importance.

"I was a cop once, right. You've got good perception. What is it? The way we smell or something?"

Roy Ambers laughed sharply. "In this place, any-

body who's outside the bars can be figured for a cop. Reasonable assumption?"

Cam nodded. "And likewise anybody on your side of the bars is a criminal. Reasonable assumption?"

Ambers averted his eyes. "Say what you've got to say, then leave me alone."

"Fine with me. Let's get right to it, then. Did you kill Derek Williams?"

"Right to it. No."

"The police have told you the night they figure he got it. Right?"

"Right."

"But you haven't given them any alibi—and don't say you don't need one. You wouldn't be here if you didn't need something."

The boy's eyes flashed. "Just who are you anyway? What's your interest in me?"

"Son, I've got absolutely no interest in you. You want to get yourself convicted of murder, that's fine by me. I don't know you, I don't much like you. So at the base of it you're no different to me than all those people all across the country who every day get themselves convicted of murder. I'm not here on my account, but on somebody else's. You've got yourself one friend at least. Jennifer Harmon."

"Jenny? She hired you?"

"Correction. I work for her uncle. She *asked* him to help you. He, in turn, *asked* me to help *her*. Now, I'm saying this just once. I got up pretty early this morning to catch a plane from New York to this city just for this little chat we're having. I happen to hate flying in airplanes, which served to prejudice me

against you before I even left the Kennedy airstrip. So now, if I find you to be what I consider even the least bit uncooperative, I don't have any hard feeling about grabbing the next plane back and telling Professor Harmon that I think you're guilty as hell and that his niece isn't as good a judge of character as he thinks she is. As a matter of fact, I've just about reached that point right now."

"Okay. All right. If Jenny asked you to help, I guess I should be grateful and cooperative, as much as I can be."

"Try real hard. Okay, once more: did you kill Derek Williams?"

"Once more: no."

"Do you know where he is?"

"No. I don't have any idea."

"Why do the police think you do?"

"They say I threatened to kill him."

"And did you?"

"Yes, I guess so."

"Don't guess."

"Yes. I did say that. There were plenty of people around to hear it, too. Students from the school."

"Why the threat?"

A pause. "It sounds kind of strange. Almost stupid. But he threatened me, so I threatened him back. That's all. Just like a couple of kids saying what they were going to do to each other if . . ."

"If what? What was he threatening you with?"

Roy Ambers shook his head. "Now comes the stupid part. For a while this past summer, I lived at a commune up north in the Napa Valley. So did Derek.

For my part I just wanted to try it, you know, to see what it was like. Well, I didn't go for it much—not the way this one was run, anyway—so I cut out. I still could have lived there while going to classes, it's not that far up. So, anyway, I'm in town less than a week when Derek comes up to me and says that the commune leaders didn't much like the way I left. He said they were concerned that I might break the silence and he had been told to pass on the message that I'd better watch my step. That's when I sounded off on him."

"That's when you told him you'd kill him."

"Right."

"His threat must have been serious itself, for you to have come back with a murder threat."

Roy Ambers laughed a one-syllable laugh. After the passing of a few seconds, Cam knew that he had received all the comment on that point he was likely to get.

"All right. You said something about breaking silence. What does that mean? Silence about what?"

"It's like you don't talk about what the group does. Sort of like a secret society. You know?"

Cam knew. The Mafia had such a concept. They called it *omerta*. "So you feel honor bound not to break your oath of silence? Or is it something else? Like, you're afraid to break it?"

"Some of both, I guess."

"I told you before; we've stopped guessing."

"Some of both."

"All right. What did Derek Williams threaten you with?"

"That's part of what I'm pledged not to tell."

Cam remembered something Jenny had said. "A witchcraft thing? Some kind of evil spell? Was that the threat?"

No response. Another tack:

"Jenny said that this Williams also left the cult. Do you know why?"

"No. I don't think he left voluntarily though."

Cam smiled inwardly. The boy had accepted the word *cult* with no reaction. Fine. "Why do you say that?"

"Well, he was a *part* of it. I mean, he was, well, a *joiner* type of person."

"So he probably was expelled."

"Probably."

"Why?"

"I don't know for sure."

"Speculate then. Why might he have gotten the boot?"

Pause. "Well, he could have broken one of the rules. He wasn't very brave."

"Oh? And the rules demand that a member be brave?"

Roy looked as if he had somehow been trapped into an admission. "Some . . . some people might say that."

New tack:

"All right. I want a straight answer to this next one. Where were you the night the police say Williams got his?"

Roy's eyes looked straight into Cam's. "I'm sorry. That one I can't answer."

"Can't or won't? Don't you know how important this is?"

"Can't *and* won't. And I know full well, Mr. Sanchez, just how important it is."

That looked like that. "Anything more that you can tell me? About anything that might help?"

Roy Ambers shook his head. That *was* that. Except for one thing more.

"After I leave, one of the policemen will come in asking your permission for me to borrow one of your personal things they are holding. Give them permission."

"What do you want of mine? And why?"

Cam's eyes narrowed. "As to what, I don't know yet. As to why, that's a secret, friend. The silence game can be played two ways."

"Not very much," Ktara reported. "The door was closed, and I can't read very well through stone or steel."

Cam nodded. They were waiting for the desk sergeant to return from the locker area. "I know," he said. He was referring to the closed door as well as to her limitation in power. It was that limitation which caused her inability to read Harmon's thoughts. The plate surrounding the front of his brain prevented her penetration, just as the closed door had prevented her penetration into the cell area.

"It would have been very simple. None of them saw the black cat until it tried to push against the door."

Cam imagined Ktara in her cat form being uncere-
moniously removed from the station.

"Not quite as bad as that," she countered. "I can be
fleet of foot when I have to be."

"But you got nothing."

"Very little. A large wave of guilt, though. Associat-
ed, I think, with the particular night you questioned
him about."

"You think he did it then—killed the other lad?"

Ktara smiled. "Who can tell?"

"I can. And he *didn't!*"

"Jenny," Cam acknowledged. "You're supposed to
be—"

"I know where I'm supposed to be. But I couldn't
just hang around out there, not knowing. Did he say
anything?"

"Nothing worth mentioning, not yet."

"Then what happens now?"

"Now," Cam began, but the return of the desk
sergeant cut him off. He examined the contents of the
bag which had been emptied onto the counter. A wal-
let, an assortment of coins, a belt, and an intricately
carved copper medallion hanging from a rawhide
thong. Cam considered the medallion, then glanced
at Ktara. She nodded.

"This," he said to the sergeant. As the policeman
gathered up the remainder of the items into his bag,
Jenny began to reach for the one Cam had chosen.
Cam's huge hand came down around her wrist before
she had touched it. Her eyes widened.

"Why?"

"I don't want it messed with." He again glanced at

Ktara who stepped gracefully between himself and Jenny and, grasping the medallion by its thong, carefully placed the object into a fold of her black cape.

The look on Jenny's face told Cam that neither he nor Ktara had endeared themselves to her by the action. "If you want to know something about the medal, I can tell you. Roy said it was a copy of a Persian crest which was carved in the likeness of Ahura-Mazda, God of Light. But I don't see how your taking it will further Roy's cause."

"Then I suggest you complain to your uncle," Cam replied. "You'll have the opportunity in a moment, if these good gentlemen here will allow us to make a collect call on their telephone."

The desk sergeant nodded and gestured toward a desk to his right.

"Tell her yourself," Cam said into the phone. "It might lend a little more authority."

He handed the instrument to Jenny and watched impassively as she flinched under what he was sure was a verbal barrage her uncle now was hurling at her. Main theme: get out of Sanchez's hair. Supporting theme: get back to the books. Repeat of main theme. Then as the red-faced niece submissively returned the telephone to Cam, he made his report.

He summarized it, "In short, nothing very useful. I suppose this cult-commune is a possible lead, though."

The professor's voice came loud and clear. "It looks almost probable. You stay and check it out as far as

you can. I want Ktara to take the next flight back—with the medallion.”

“And then?”

“Then we all may be joining you. It all depends.”

When Cam had replaced the phone on the receiver, he began to relay Harmon’s instructions. Then he stopped. “I guess that would be repeating what you already know.”

“It would,” Ktara replied. “But to set the record straight on something else, this medallion . . .”

“Yes, Roy’s medallion,” Jenny pounced. “What do you want that for?”

Cam answered. “Your uncle wants it for his own reasons.” His voice was sharp, his turn back to Ktara abrupt. “You were saying?”

Ktara smiled. “The medallion. Your employer’s niece was wrong about it, about what it represents.”

“It’s Persian, just like I said. A Zoroastrian god. Ahura-Mazda, God of Light.”

“It is Persian,” Ktara agreed. “And it is a representation of the face of a Zoroastrian god. However, the god is not Ahura-Mazda, but his opposite number. Ahriman, God of Darkness.”

CHAPTER 5

The medallion shines in the reflected moonlight. It seems to beam in on the representation of the smaller heavenly orb which encircles the copper-etched eyes of open wildness characterizing the face of him who is the sworn enemy of light. He, the god, or rather his likeness, hangs from the thong of leather from the neck of the wearer who is fearful, not of the god's image, but of something more natural. Yet even in his fear, he approaches the cause of that fear, careful to move in the shadows where they can be found, careful to move quietly in the still night so that the night will remain still.

But there are sounds ahead. And from the lone structure on the side of a steep incline there is light. The flickering light which, shooting intermittently from the small windows of the large structure, indicates that its source is in the burning of wood. And the sounds are voices, all speaking together, which, as the wearer of the medallion comes closer to the nearest window, he can make out but barely since the chant is hushed almost to the level of a whisper.

*. . . May the snare of Ea grasp it
May the net of Nisaba entrap it. . . .*

To his rear he sees again the lone figure on the hill-top, a figure cradling a rifle of some kind. He had gotten past that one by skirting the contours of the mound. And now he sees that on two crests to the other side of the large structure, there are two other figures keeping their vigilance. He has not yet been detected, will not be unless he moves into the patches of light dotting the landscape. He moves carefully to the window, and now there are figures he, the wearer, can discern within the structure. They stand close to the window, their backs to him, their shapes ill-defined by the firelight which is blocked by the rows of them in front of those nearest. All wear the black-hooded robes which are not black but red and but look to be black to his eyes, but his mind and memory know their true color. All chant the chant, the words of which are not remembered in that they are new to him.

*Like water may they pour it out
Like a crystal goblet may they crash it to pieces
Like a floor-tile may they snap it. . . .*

And there is a new fear within him as he wonders as to the nature of what is happening within the building. He had not expected a ceremony this night. His business was with just one of them, but he could not possibly find him here now. A wave of frustration.

A thought to go away now, to come back another time.

An inward urge to move from his place at the window.

And somehow a refusal to do so. A flash of curiosity.

And now the row of black—red—hooded ones before him lower. They kneel, and reveal to his eyes the scene at the center of the floor. Between the two fires. At the black altar.

The one in the middle, the man, naked except for the goat-head mask, officiates. He holds the firebrand solemnly, leads the chant.

Fleuret . . . Bathim . . . Pursan . . . Abigar. . . .

The two on either side of him, the women. No, one a woman, middle-aged; the other a girl in her teens. Both naked, the young one with hardly any flesh on her thin frame, the older, a mass of pink flabby softness. Then, on either side of the two women, two boys; they too, are naked and like the women, they too have their wrists shackled to the black altar.

Sargatanas . . . Loray . . . Valefar . . . Forau. . . .

Except for him with the firebrand, those in the center are quiet, without voice. Yet there is the smell of animal fear in them which reaches even the nostrils of the wearer of the medallion who watches from without.

Must go now! Must . . . before it is too late.

But now there is a new smell in the air as he with the firebrand, he who leads the still-low chant raises

high his torch almost to touch his goat-furred forehead, then moves to the first of those chained to the altar. It is the older woman, and suddenly her hair is aflame. Her mouth opens as if to scream, but there is no sound. None other than the chanting voices.

Satanachia . . . Pruslas . . . Aamon . . . Barbatos. . . .

Writhing, squirming, pulling against the manacles, but to no avail. Such now is the activity of each of the four, as the hair of each in turn is set ablaze.

Agaliarep . . . Buer . . . Gusoyne . . . Botis. . . .

And now to the smell of burning hair is added a new and even more fearsome smell. The cold and icy smell which, in contrast to that of the fires, is the very smell of impending death. For now he who wears the goat-head has no longer the firebrand in his hand, but rather a curved dagger the long red handle of which is carved into the shape of a hissing viper.

It is the young girl whose heart has been selected to receive the first plunge of the glinting steel.

Nebiros . . . Ayperos . . . Nuberus . . . Glasabolos. . . .

Then comes the turn of the older woman, followed by one of the young men, then the last of the four.
. . .

Lucifuge . . . Bael . . . Agares . . . Marbis. . . .

And now the binding spell is broken in a wave of disgust and mounting sickness within the stomach-pit of the wearer of the medallion. His feet become unrooted from where they stood. He runs, the copper crest upon his breast swinging on its leather thong, the cold dead moonlight dancing in the eyes of the god depicted thereon, giving the entire face a visage of insane abandon, of merriment in welcome and familiar madness. . . .

Damien Harmon opened his eyes and removed his fingertips from his temples where they had been maintaining a steady pressure. On his study desk, before his wheelchair, flickering reflections of the dying fire in the hearth, the copper bas-relief of Ahriman the Dark hung suspended from a gooseneck lamp whose bulb had been dormant, but which Harmon now switched into activity. It was when he attempted to speak to the woman in the chair across the room that he realized his heart and veins were pulsating violently. He paused for control, then turned his chair to face the woman. It was she who spoke first.

"You were able to see all of it." It was not so much a question, but a statement for which she sought confirmation.

He nodded. "I believe so, although I have no way of knowing if it was the same as you saw it."

"In the main, it was," Ktara said. "We may have understood it differently, however. You recognized the ceremony, of course."

Harmon poured himself a larger than normal measure of brandy.

"I am familiar with some of the components of the chant, yes. The latter parts were unmistakably the names of the top hierarchy of the infernal regions. The first lines, however, those dealing with the snares of Ea and the net of Nisaba, I'm afraid I don't . . ."

"It is ancient Assyrian. It is a consecration rite."

"And its performance, was it being performed correctly?"

Ktara seemed to weigh her words. "There was power there, yes. There always is power which accrues to the place where such a ritual is performed, regardless of how incorrectly. Controlling that power, or even influencing it, that is where one must be precise in execution."

"And your interpretation of what we saw?"

A thin smile. "It is not my interpretation which counts, Professor. I have assisted you in seeing what the medallion had in the way of latent images. In that the consequences of interpretation are grave to yourself, and to others, I should not be the one to give meaning to the events which the images released."

Harmon nodded. "Then listen if you will to my interpretation and correct me if—in terms of what *you* saw, which might be at odds with my recollection—my thinking has swerved from a correct course. First, it can be said with certainty that what Roy Ambers saw was a ritual of consecration which included human sacrifice."

Ktara did not comment. Harmon, however, contin-

ued his step-by-step reasoning process, watching as he did so for any facial reaction on her part.

“Second, we know from Cam’s interview with young Ambers that he is afraid of possible retribution from the commune at which he used to live, a commune which to my mind is undoubtedly the group we saw tonight in the latent images, a cultist group which also undoubtedly would not be concerned with any consideration of the sanctity of human life. Third, it is a fact that Ambers refuses to tell where he was on the night which the police deem to be of prime importance in the disappearance of the Williams boy. Fourth, there were strong impressions of terror linked to Ambers’ reaction as to what he saw that night.”

“That night, Professor?”

Harmon smiled inwardly. He had brought her out of her silence, even though her question was directed to the point he already had been questioning.

“Yes, I recognize the leap from empirical evidence to logical deduction. But it stands to reason. Ambers refuses to talk about the night of Williams’ disappearance because that was the night the events of which we have just seen. And, if I am correct in that surmise, there is another step which logic can take us to, under the circumstances.”

He watched her eyes carefully now, using a sip from his brandy to gain a dramatic pause.

“If the nights are the same, it stands to reason that one of those we just saw die by the dagger, one of the two young men, was in fact Derek Williams. Further, if that is the case, Roy Ambers knows exactly how

Williams was killed, but for fear of retribution—if not for fear of implication; he already is suspect—he is convinced he dare not say anything at all.”

The expression on Ktara’s face was noncommittal. “There are several *ifs* involved in holding up your final deduction.”

“Perhaps. But my *final* deduction need not be based on faultless interpretation of what we’ve seen. The important deduction is that Roy Ambers is innocent of the killing of Derek Williams. This I deduce, not only from seeing what I have posited hypothetically as the death of young Williams, but, just as important, from the sense of complete revulsion Roy Ambers emitted upon witnessing the four killings, regardless of who the four were.”

“Then I take it you are ready.”

Harmon refilled his own brandy snifter and poured the liquor also into a second glass.

“I shall awaken your Master. I would appreciate your asking him to join us.”

The new log Harmon had placed on the fire had caught, yet it seemed neither to brighten nor warm the huge booklined study. He was aware that this effect, or the lack of it, was more psychological than physical; it was caused by the grave bargain he was about to make. Even so, there was something about the gigantic personage in the formal dinner clothes that seemed to draw all heat and light into himself, something akin to the way a sponge soaks up moisture or the way a magnet attracts steel filings.

Count Dracula’s face was calm, but the red centers

of his eyes were live with anticipation, an emotion which also was apparent in the slight lengthening of his sharp eyeteeth.

"Then it is a firm wager?" he asked in his thickly accented low voice.

"I cannot offer up Jennifer as your prize," Harmon said.

"Then I shall not ask that of you. We shall wager thus: if you win, the terms shall be as before. I shall place myself in your control for six full months without attempt to escape or to subvert that control. If I win this gamble, you will merely take from within me the device by which you exercise your control. Is that agreeable?"

"And once control is removed—what then?"

Dracula smiled. "Then I am a free agent. To do as I will. To whom I will."

Harmon could not control the shudder which moved upward from his lower spine. They had covered all the terms. The Count would assist in ferreting out whatever information Harmon decided would be useful in proving Roy Ambers innocent or guilty. Once that innocence or guilt was determined, then the winner of the gamble would demand his prize. There was nothing more to cover, nothing more to debate. At least, he thought not—not until the Count brought up the subject:

"There is the matter of time. There should be a time limit set upon our wager. What is the precise hour?"

The room was not light enough to illuminate the antique clock over the mantelpiece. Ktara's eyes

nonetheless read the hands clearly. It was slightly before four A.M.

"Four," Dracula repeated. "I offer these terms: forty-eight hours. Two nights hence at four A.M., a winner shall be declared—and a loser."

"Two days?" Harmon shook his head. "Impossible!"

The Count's eyebrows arched. "Impossible, Professor? With the resources you command? Come now!"

"Impossible," Harmon insisted. "Perhaps in four days. Or possibly three. . ."

"All right," the Count said pleasantly. "I am not in the habit of compromising, but this once I shall make an exception. To the forty-eight hours we will add another twelve, for a total of sixty. If the police release your young man by four P.M.—two and a half days from now—you have won."

The compromise was not much, Harmon realized; the time span gave him still only two nights of the vampire's service. His eyes focused on the black-gloved hand extended toward him, then at the lips which smiled with anticipation.

"Come, Professor, is it agreed then? As gentlemen of our word?"

Harmon said nothing, but accepted the hand; the fingers tightened around his own. The vampire laughed cruelly.

"Professor Harmon, you are an intelligent man. But your species is dull-brained compared to mine. Do you think I do not know already of the assistance my pet Ktara gave you in your little seance this evening? Did it not occur to you that the *evidence* upon

which you based your deductions and upon which you have entered into this wager with me—did it not occur to you that some or all of this might have been bent in ways which would lead you to those deductions? I see that such a thought did *not* occur to you. I would crave to know, now that it has been brought to your attention, just how unsettling it is to you?”

He laughed again and, releasing Harmon’s hand, turned his blood-red gaze toward Ktara, who sat curled up in her chair by the fireplace.

Harmon also looked at her. But again he could read nothing in her expression. Absolutely nothing, for such are the components of the face of a purring black cat.

CHAPTER 6

There is one thing about having wealth and influential acquaintances. Once you make a decision to do something, your movements can be both precise and swift. One telephone call, even at an indecent morning hour, can secure you the loan of a plush, isolated farm in the Napa Valley from a well-to-do head of a San Francisco securities firm—even though the man had to be tracked down to the hotel in Barbados at which he was vacationing. Another telephone call can arrange for a Lear charter jet to span the continent in a half day, and two more calls secure special limousines and panel trucks at both ends, to take the party of two plus baggage, including a number of crates, one especially large, to the place where they would be domiciled.

The calls were made, the flight took place, and by nine o'clock the same evening, the new operating headquarters were ready to function.

One aspect of the operation was the communications system. The primary link-up was between Cam and Harmon by means of small but powerful transistorized radios on an ultra-high frequency. A third unit, connected to both, was implanted behind Count Dracula's right ear; this had two purposes, the first

being the normal one of communication, the second functioning as a locator keyed to portable blip-units, which normally were installed in one of Harmon's motor vehicles. They had been brought on this trip even though Harmon was not certain they'd have to be used. When all was set up, the professor put in a call for Cam. They'd not been in contact since the telephone call the previous evening. He wanted to pass on what he knew, or thought he did, and get an update on what Cam had been doing. He also wanted to communicate his party's whereabouts.

He accomplished none of these things.

Immediately after he sent his open-line signal, Cam's voice shot back:

"Not now—*later!*"

"How's that, brother? Why *not* now?"

Cam released the communicator button on the device in his pocket, then thought better of it and pushed it back on, volume high on a one-way beam. Now Harmon could listen to what was said, but could not broadcast through. At least this way he could get some idea of what was happening, even though the next sound Harmon heard must have been puzzling.

It was the sound of knuckles smashing into a face.

Cam's knuckles, somebody else's face.

The somebody else remained on the floor where he had landed, sitting up and staring wide-eyed at the big bullet-headed man who stood, hands on hips, glaring down at him.

"I don't like to explain myself," Cam said menacingly. "Now get up."

The obedient young man who, under his scraggly long black hair looked to be in his late twenties, raised his hands palms outward as if to ward off further attack.

“Hey, there ain’t no reason to get violent. You told me you wanted to make a connection. I bring you here, and now you say you don’t want it, you say later. I just asked why, that’s all.”

There were two other people in the flea-bag waterfront apartment, one a younger version of the unkempt man who just had gotten back on his feet, the other, a square-built girl about Jenny’s age, but with no other points of comparison. Her hair was cut short in almost butch style, her nose was large and flat and her chest seemed to flow down into hips without benefit of any connecting waist. All three wore the suede vests with Indian designs which he had seen on Roy Ambers. All three also wore the copper medallions with the face which Ktara had said belonged to the Persian god of darkness.

An hour before, Cam had made contact with the man at one of the places on the list he’d extracted from the cooperative desk sergeant the day before. The list contained bars, coffee shops, discotheques, boutiques, and even a few crash-pads, where suspected college student drug pushers were known to gather. By day and night these places operated, and by day and night they all had one thing in common: their general level of seediness. Cam had spent most of the hours since leaving the station, moving from place to place on the list. He was not sure what he was looking

for, but was certain he'd found it in a pool-hall when he saw the familiar vest and medallion.

His approach had been direct. He had known some people who had worn such an emblem, he said, and they had told him to look up their group if he was in the San Francisco area. Now he was here, and he wanted to look them up. The initial contact had not asked him why. He merely accepted the explanation, but told Cam that others would have to make the decision whether or not his request was legitimate. He led Cam to the apartment; it was obvious it was a marijuana crash pad, although there was not a stick in sight. Cam judged, that should they have made a mistake and brought an undercover cop here, he would find nothing. Nothing except the young man, and girl whose eyes said they were semi-stoned.

It was the girl who now spoke.

"You, big man. You're not going to make any points whaling off on old Harvey like that."

Cam stared hard at her. Neither she nor the younger man had moved from their cross-legged seated position since he'd entered. There had been little time for the one called Harvey to make much of an explanation as to why he had been brought. Harmon's call and its follow-up had gotten things off to a fast start.

"I just don't like to be questioned, that's all," he said.

She looked him up and down. There was no mistaking what she was thinking behind her devouring pig-eyes.

"Sorry, brother, but that's why you're here. For questions. It's your answers that determine what

comes next. Sit down over here. Next to me. The name is Vinna. What's yours?"

"That comes later," Cam said. But he sat, not quite as close to the girl as she had wanted, however. "Ask some other questions if you want."

"I want," she said, and the multimeaning of her statement again was more than obvious.

"I'll tell you something *I* want," Cam said in a low voice. "I want your little friend there to bring his hands out from behind his vest. Real slow. Then I want him to be just as slow to place the knife he's holding on the floor. I'd like to see the whole thing, not just the end of the handle like now."

The boy did not respond at all until Vinna nodded her head in a short movement. Then, his blank expression the same, he withdrew the knife and placed it before the girl. It was an unusual weapon, Cam observed. The blade was curved like an ancient Egyptian dagger. The red handle was carved into the semblance of a snake head, its jaws open and its forked tongue partly extending outward.

"Satisfied?" the girl asked. When Cam did not respond, she continued:

"All right. This is how I got you figured. You say you met some of our people before, but not around Frisco. Would Mexico be the place?"

"It could be."

"I asked for a definite answer."

"It was." This response was, Cam knew, a gamble, but it had to be Mexico if the rest of the story he'd decided to use was to fit. If, on the other hand, none of their band had been across the border, he'd just

tipped them off that he was an imposter. But if it was a larger organization, they'd have to check to be sure. If, indeed, they were interested in him at all. But, once his story was out, if it was accepted, he had an idea they'd be interested. More than interested.

"Mexico. I thought you looked like a Mex. Who were they—the ones you met?"

"Names were not exchanged. That was not the purpose of our meeting."

She considered. "But the exchange of something was, is that it?"

"It could be. It was."

"That's better. What brings you up here?"

"Let's say I've got something more to exchange."

"And you think we'd be interested?"

Cam shrugged. "You were before. Maybe things have changed?"

"Maybe. Are you in this country legally?"

"I am in this country. That is enough."

The girl smiled. "These members of our group you met, did they tell you much about us?"

"Only that I should contact you if I was up here. Also that you are a large group with a lot of stroke, I believe the word was."

"Nothing more?"

Now Cam wondered just how far he should go. "Well, there was something I'm not so certain about. It was said that you are a powerful family, but I did not gather that the power which was referred to was that which I am familiar with. Not, in other words, political power or influence."

The girl's laugh brought smiles to the faces of the two men.

"It is influence of a sort. A very special sort. All right. What is it you have and how much and when can you make delivery if we buy?"

Cam shook his head. "I do not think you are the one I wish to tell all these things to. You must be careful, I appreciate that. But you must appreciate my need for care, also. There is one who is the leader of your, ah, family."

The girl's face darkened. "I am authorized to make a transaction of this sort."

Harvey piped in. "That's true, she is. Vinna is a member of the Inner Circle."

His voice croaked to a dead halt as Vinna's head snapped in his direction. Cam appeared not to notice the exchange.

"I am sorry, but I must talk to the top man. Or to no one. I can find other buyers for what I have."

Harvey, in what was an apparent attempt to get back into the girl's good graces, broke the silence that followed.

"Vinna, maybe it would be a good idea to have Paulus interview him. *He* would be able to convince —"

"Yes," the girl said, letting the word roll slowly around her mouth before ending it. "Yes, Paulus does have a talent for such things. You, big man, will see things his way, I am certain of it. We will take you there tonight."

"Tonight?" Harvey's eyebrows strained upward. "But tonight . . ."

"Will do excellently. We meet back here in one hour. Harvey, you stay with Mr. Big Man. Take him some place for coffee or something. Cricket," she said to the other boy, "you have the car here then."

Damien Harmon checked the telephone number on the slip of paper he'd had in his pocket and dialed it. When a voice answered on the other end, he spoke rapidly, first giving his name.

"I recognize that the time is not overly convenient, Commissioner, and I apologize for that. But I am in a hurry for some information. Could you have a check run on the whereabouts of a commune in Napa—a kind of a cult, the emblem of which is a copper medallion with the face of an ancient god on it? They also seem to affect leather vests carrying Indian designs. One thing more, the leader's name would appear to be Paulus. . . . No, I don't know whether that's a first or last name."

When he had returned the phone to its receiver, Harmon smiled. He'd learn about Paulus shortly. He'd learn a lot of things shortly. And Paulus, whoever he was, might well learn a couple of things as well.

CHAPTER 7

The Farm, as it was simply called, was a rambling seven acres of hills and dips, close to, but far enough away from Highway 121, to afford its population both easy access to points south and a full measure of privacy. The population at this point in time numbered just under seventy. These were members of the commune proper, although the Family included some twenty-odd others who lived either in Frisco or around Berkeley.

Paula Aliester was proud of his Farm, of his Family, and of himself, in opposite order of importance. The Farm, with its main house, its communal dining and bunk houses, and its great barn which was the commune's mass ceremonial hall, was practically all paid for. Initially, the money had come from donations of his flock, for among Family members the pooling of material wealth was a cardinal rule. *The Family provides all from its own resources.* So went the tenet, the corollary of which was that, in order to do so, one must kick in all that he had. The benefits of this arrangement were summed up in another Family motto, like the other, created by Paulus Aliester: *The Family has neither rich nor poor; all of the Family are of the Power.*

It was recognized, of course, that some were more powerful than others. There was, for example, the Inner Coven of thirteen. And there was Paulus Aliester himself, lord and master of Farm and Family, whose word was law, but a law eagerly obeyed by those of his flock.

Not bad at all for a man whose twenty-eighth birthday had been celebrated only three months previously.

In the beginning, the movement had begun much like other communal groupings of young people. But Paulus Aliester, a drop-out philosophy instructor, discovered that he had two advantages over others who congregated to commune with Nature and the bare-boned life. He had a keen skill of organization and he had a special brand of knowledge which his studies had provided him. Two disciplines, really. One was that of the occult, the second stemmed from his laboratory work with hallucinatory drugs. Combining the two was a stroke of brilliance on his part, and then, adding his organizational skills to the scheme, he found himself steadily gaining in the only real power he recognized—power over other human beings and an abundance of material wealth.

On certain dark nights, in moments of quieter reflection, especially after one of the more barbaric ceremonies, a disturbing thought would come to him. Although his own food and drink were carefully prepared by himself so that it contained nothing of the “special” ingredients put in the others’ portions, he could feel himself slipping into a state of mind that uncomfortably mirrored the wide-eyed frenzy of his subjects. He recognized that the human psyche will

react to mass emotion, but he had always held the ability to divorce himself from the events at hand. While, at the start, the ritualistic murders he performed, or ordered to be performed, had had as their object either discipline within the organization or the acquisition of wealth, lately he was finding himself enjoying them for their own sake, finding himself arranging for such events far more frequently than either his financial demands or the demands of ritual called for. He was beginning to fear that he himself might be slipping over the edge of reality, over the edge into the abyss of insane-asylum horror which he had specially created for the membership of his devoted flock. This was one of the things that had begun to disturb what had formerly been calm untroubled sleep.

There was another thing, too. Lately, as he began for the first time to really listen to the chants accompanying the rituals within the great ceremonial hall, he had detected—felt, rather—the presence of Something Else. That was how he thought of it, with capital initial letters. Paulus Aliester had always viewed the supernatural with the scorn of a completely rational man. Gods and devils were for fools. Yet, could it possibly be that, if there were such things, that all of these old rituals might *actually* conjure up Something. . . .

He did not like to think about the possibility.

He had been thinking that maybe it was time to take his profits and disappear from the scene. All of the land was in his name. He had bought it and he could sell it. The Family would be dispossessed of its

Farm, but the members would gain even here. They would be free from the yoke of their leader—or some of them would, those who came out of their withdrawal (and his) with their minds intact. Yes, perhaps it was time. The group perhaps had grown too large, too unwieldy even for him to handle. And although he felt he had covered his traces well, there always was the possibility of the police.

Strange he should think about that now, especially after Vinna's call. A Mex with a big package, she said. Of what and how much, either in pounds or in dollar-value, she couldn't say. The man would talk only to the top leader. The Man. The Law? Always possible, especially with that Roy Ambers punk locked up in Frisco. But, no, Ambers would not talk. He understood what would happen if he did. And Vinna, disgusting pig that she was, still had a good brain in her head. Besides, the Mex would be on Family turf, if he did turn out to be something other than what . . .

Something other. Something Else. Paulus Aliester suppressed an involuntary shudder. Must think on other things. Must prepare for tonight's ceremonies. Yes, activity.

He rose from the chair he'd been occupying in his private quarters, the four west rooms of the main house second floor, and pulled a red satin cord. The entire room was furnished in red satin, except for the three areas on the walls which featured floor-to-ceiling mirrors. Even the door which now opened was covered with the shiny material.

The three girls bowed with respect to their master. The sight of them always pleased Paulus Aliester. A

Chinese, a black and a white, the most perfectly developed of their sisters in the flock, beautiful in their nudity, complete except for the red satin headband each wore.

"I must bathe and dress," he said. The girls acknowledged his words with another boy, and moments later the proper equipment and vestments were assembled about the figure of Paulus Aliester who pleasurable watched the transactions which took place next in the strategically placed mirrors adjoining the walls.

They handled him efficiently, with the respect due to his holy person. Efficiency, respect, and adoration, too. These were their watchwords as his special "nuns" whose job it was to cater to his every need. Now as he watched them sponge his naked frame, he again questioned the thoughts he had earlier about leaving all of this behind. He was not what one would call a handsome young man, and Paulus Aliester recognized that. His face was bony in an irregular way, his nose long and crooked, his ears overlarge and his eyes set too close together. His physique was hardly one to command any attention. He stood but five feet six, his scrawny frame weighing in at one-forty. And yet he was adored by these three, and they were envied by every female member of his congregation who wished that she might be in this coveted place, to touch with her hands the naked flesh of the High Priest's chest and stomach.

He felt the urge rise up within him, felt the thrill of the three women who softly caressed his skin with their sponges, felt them awaiting his next command

and wondering if he would give it and whom he would give it to, each wondering if the blessing would be bestowed upon her. He began to recall who it had been the previous night, then stopped himself. No, one in his position does not hand out his favors on considerations of how those not favored will feel.

"I am bathed satisfactorily for now. Two of you must leave for the present, to return when I again ring." Those were the words, now came the choosing. "Azliel, you shall remain here."

The name had been given her by her lord. The Chinese girl bowed more deeply than the others who complacently left the room. When the door had closed behind them, he took Azliel's hand and gently led her to the satin-covered couch. Then he permitted her to serve him.

Refreshed and berobed, Paulus Aliester drained his second goblet of Scotch. The whisky always helped him in his act, allowed his sense of timing to somehow sharpen to the needs of his flock. There were things to do prior to the ceremony, of course, and the time was drawing near for him to begin doing them. But under his self-imposed rituals even he had to await the proper time.

It was Azliel, her face flushed with satisfaction from her previous service, who entered his chambers and announced to him that the sacrificial victim was ready to be viewed. Moments later he opened the door to what had been one of the bedrooms on the first floor of the great house. Here there was no satin, only rough-hewn wood paneling on the walls like the

wooden planks which served as flooring. The room was furnished with nothing other than a large high-backed chair, which had once graced the altar area of an Episcopal church. Along the walls were several pairs of manacles. Lighting in the room was dim, its source being three wall-held torches. As he entered, he saw with satisfaction that only two of his Inner Circle were present—except of course for the victim. And here, in his own domain, Paulus Aliester had the unique experience of being surprised.

There were two victims chained to the wall. Both were young women, whose faces over their stripped bodies were hidden in shadow.

He looked to one of his inner group for an explanation.

“Two were brought?”

“No, Paulus. Your instructions were obeyed exactly. The group sent to Petaluma destroyed all in the marked house except one, the youngest daughter. This other was found outside, on the grounds.”

“They have been properly subdued?”

“Both have received the Needle of Tranquil Obedience, yes.”

It was a euphemism for the potent pentothal with which he assured that no untoward resistance to his rights would take place. Members of the Inner Circle knew that he employed the Needle since they themselves administered it, but even they had no idea of the serum's composition. All they were aware of was that it came out of the small chemistry laboratory he had outfitted with a host of old alchemy symbolism and equipment.

"I would inspect the two," he said.

A torch-bearing aide led the way to the first girl, who was no more than thirteen or fourteen, by the look of her. Her eyes were glassy.

"Girl, do you know where you are?"

Dully: "No."

"Do you know what happened to your family?"

"They all are dead. Killed."

"And only you live?"

"Only I live."

"Do you know why you were spared?"

"No."

Paulus nodded. "The other."

Again the torch shifted. Seeing the face of this older girl made the High Priest lick his lips. A pretty piece, she was. He had seen her before, had in fact wanted her. Sacrificed? Perhaps he might add a fourth to his nuns. He would see.

"Do you know where you are?" he asked.

"Yes," the answer was given in the bland unfeeling voice of the other, but Paulus was not satisfied.

"A bit more of the Needle on this one." He then turned back to the girl.

"You were discovered on the grounds."

"Yes."

"Why were you there?"

"I wanted to . . . to find out about . . . the commune."

"And why was that?"

Before the girl could answer, the outer door opened. "Paulus, we're here. We've brought the Mex. Where do you want to see him?"

Paulus considered. His usual interviewing place was elsewhere, a room which conveyed something of brotherly warmth to the potential newcomer to the cult. But this man was something different. He might not be impressed by warmth, but by something else. Yes, Something Else.

“Bring him here,” he said.

Cam Sanchez was not unaware that those who surrounded him in what was obviously a waiting room all were armed with the curious-looking daggers he’d first seen in the hand of the one called Cricket. Still, if it came to it, he figured he’d have a fighting chance to free himself. To use a knife, one had to get fairly close to his intended victim. Cam’s skill in the martial arts was such that getting close to him was a lot easier than it sounded. Although it would not surprise him if several of those who guarded him also had had their share of unarmed combat training. It would fit the pattern of all he had seen so far, a pattern of good organization and thorough planning.

From the moment he had left the waterfront apartment, the one called Harvey had not left his side. They had gone to a coffee house not far from where they were to regather, and Harvey, although uncommunicative as to the nature of the group or where they were going, had stuck to him like glue, even following him into the men’s room. On further consideration, Cam realized there wasn’t much he could communicate to Harmon even if he had been left alone. Harmon had been getting the small amount of

pertinent information direct, the same time as Cam received it. Also, the professor would be able to track Cam's movements through the electronic finder which was a part of the communicator in his jacket pocket. Still, Cam was interested in what the professor's plans were, how and at what point he would loose what Harmon once called "the most formidable weapon at our command."

The thought made Cam shudder. It was not the killing he minded. He had killed unmercifully himself. No, it was the *way* the vampire . . .

He looked up to see the solid Vinna standing before him. Her smile told him that she had seen his shudder and had misinterpreted its cause. Good. He could lose nothing by their thinking he was suitably impressed. He had little idea of just how impressed he was to become.

"The one you came to see will see you now," Vinna said.

"It's about time," he replied, with just a little bit of edginess to his voice. It was taken as he'd intended, as a false bravado.

She turned and led the way. He saw that some six or seven of his guards followed.

The room was hardly lighted at all, only one wall torch casting an uneven haze. A high-backed chair faced the doorway. Obviously the red-robed man sitting in the chair was he whom he had come for.

"I am Paulus Aliester. You are?" He broke off his voice, waiting for completion of the sentence by the newcomer. Cam provided the completion.

"I am a seller of goods. I'm told you are a buyer."

"That is not the response I had in mind. Your name."

"The others will tell you I don't find that convenient to give."

Paulus smiled. "The others will tell *you* that all that matters in this place is that which *I* find convenient. However, I suppose there are times when one must offer proof of his assertions."

He signalled one of the hooded figures close to his chair. A firebrand was placed into the flame of the one burning torch, then another. These were carried to the dead torches on the walls, which in moments gave forth light. Cam had no trouble seeing what he was intended to see. The two girls' faces were hidden, but the rest he saw plainly. He clenched his teeth hoping to suppress any emotion on his face, but that act by itself communicated emotion.

"These two will die tonight," Paulus said matter-of-factly. "I tell you this only to impress upon you that human life, that of outsiders, means very little to us here. You are an outsider. Is my meaning clear?"

"I think so. Now, then."

It was at this point that one of the girls chained to the wall murmured, and one of the cloaked figures holding a torch reflexively lifted his light to inspect the source. As he did so, the girl turned her head to avoid the sharp light in her eyes. Too late Cam realized that he had reacted to the face which turned toward his.

Jenny!

"*Grab him!*" Paulus shouted. He knows her!"

In response a pair of heavy hands touched Cam's

left shoulder. Just touched. Before touch could become grasp, Cam had lashed out with a horizontal handblade that splattered into the bridge of the nose of the burly youth whose hands now were occupied in trying to reach the source of his screaming pain. A side-kick in the middle of a protruding stomach sent another to the floor skidding in his own vomit, and a full-fist uppercut dislodged the jaw and a few teeth of a third.

Now the flash of curved steel was added to the attack from that encircled and closed in on the big Puerto Rican. One blade-thruster immediately discovered that, however psychologically effective his ceremonial robes, they did not make for efficient body movement. Nonetheless, as Cam's right hand grasp the top of the red hood, the young man found his body efficiently in motion, smack into three similarly robed brothers. Correction: one was a sister, the one who took his thrusting blade in the throat.

Again Cam's legs shot out and two of the brothers or sisters—Cam couldn't tell and didn't much care; a knife kills regardless of the sex of the would-be killer—doubled up in pain. At least one of them would not get up again; the crack of the hipbone was unmistakable. He pivoted and a horizontal toe-kick ended with the front of Cam's boot halfway through its receiver's left eye socket.

Thrust, receive, parry, push and throw, with a bleeding slice on his right shoulder just above the bicep. And now the killing machine that was Cam Sanchez paused to find the one who had wounded him. It was the thin boy called Cricket whose wide eyes had

not even a chance to blink before Cam's toe cracked into his temple and drove half of his skull, in the form of pointed shards, inward and through the boy's brain.

A sudden change in the lighting around him made him realize that his personal vendetta had been a luxury. He reeled around just in time to see the girl Vinna. On her face was an expression of furious rage. In her hands, high above that face, was one of the wooden torches. She brought it down hard.

He felt the searing heat on his bullet-head for only an instant. Then, in the blackness into which he was catapulted, he felt nothing.

"Nothing?" Harmon repeated, then listened as the official on the other end of the telephone connection explained that, although there were several communal groupings with which there had been trouble, the one he had asked about had a clean record. Of course, there might well be, and probably was, some sort of drug activity at such a place, but there was only so much police available, et cetera. Paulus? Right: the name was Paulus Aliester and he too had a clean record. "Anything else, Professor Harmon?"

"No. Nothing." As he clicked off, he again turned his attention to the communicator monitor. Except for sounds of motion, it was silent. Only the little green light was operative, showing Cam's location. Harmon had easily recognized the earlier sounds of battle, but had no way of knowing how the battle had turned out. But it was something else he'd heard that bothered him. The words, just before the fight began:

Get him! He knows her.

Her. Could it be possible that . . .

He hurriedly dialed a number. The girl who answered said she would go and see, then returned. Negative.

Harmon clenched his fists. As he looked again at the monitor, he saw something had changed.

The little green light had gone dead.

CHAPTER 8

“Are you satisfied, cop-pig?”

The outline of the form which met his eyes as they opened began to clear. The crimson and hooded robe the girl wore, covered up most of her, but the shape of Vinna was unmistakable. Cam shook his head hard to drive the fuzziness from his brain. A movement to bring his hands to his throbbing temples ended short of target. His wrists were chained together and a length of some three feet of chain connected them to the top of some sort of stone slab, the side of which he was propped up against. He rose haltingly to his feet which he discovered were lashed together at the ankles with a taut leather thong. They were bare. So was the rest of him.

As were the two young girls who, like him, also were chained to the stone. Unlike himself, however, the two stood motionless as in a trance. Their ankles were free.

Only Vinna stood guard in the large room, which appeared to be the inside of a barn. The altar, if that was what it was, was on a platform raised up from the center of one wall which, alone of the four walls, was covered with a heavy satin drape, the folds of which were deep. Lighting, what there was of it, was accom-

A scavenger hunt...

And what more appropriate place to begin the game than a funeral parlor. So many interesting things to be found.

For instance, it seems that a particular funeral director has some very strange ideas about the care and handling of the deceased. They never complain, of course.

Then there was the business of extra bodies, sometimes two per casket. How ghoulish! Count Dracula thought so. Even a blood-thirsty vampire has certain ethics to observe . . . and, in this case, certain inalienable rites are also to be deserved.

This is the second volume in the all-new Dracula Horror Series, original tales of legendary wickedness and modern-day suspense. The key to Dracula's twentieth century reincarnation is the brilliant scientist, Dr. Damien Harmon. By means of a fantastic electronic implant Professor Harmon is able to control, for the most part, the actions of Dracula in all his grim guises. Then, too, there is the eerie lady known as Ktara, and the faithful giant, Cam. Together they will transport you into the shadowy realm of the unreal for a feast of blood-bright horror! Come along, for mystery and murder in a jugular vein.

plished by the ubiquitous wooden torches affixed to the walls. His observations were broken off by a sharp stinging palm to his face.

"I asked you a question. Are you satisfied?"

In spite of the hammers of pain behind his eyes, Cam managed a mocking grin. "You like to ask questions, don't you?"

"Maybe, but so do you, cop. That's part of the job, asking, right? Asking so that the answers you get you can transmit back to your superiors, right? Like with this?"

Cam had no trouble recognizing his communicator. He also had no trouble recognizing the fact it was smashed.

"Handy little unit," the girl said. "Handy if you'd had a chance to use it. How unfortunate for you that Harvey kept right with you all the time. Anyway, it won't be sending anything any more. And even if it could, that won't be of much concern to you, not for much longer."

It was an effort, but Cam managed a sharp laugh. "Then, in that case it would be wasting my time to worry about it. As a matter of fact, my two girl friends here don't seem to be worrying at all, so why should I?"

Her smile was hard. "For the same reason that they should, except that they aren't aware of the fact that they're going to die tonight, both of them. Right along with you. And I'll tell you this, I'm really going to enjoy tonight's ceremonies. You know that? This little piece over here, the one you seem to know, she

is going to get it real good, and you're going to watch the whole thing. Won't that be fun?"

"Obviously, you're looking forward to it."

"You're damned right I am, Mister. You want to know why you're not drugged? It's because I wanted you to be fully aware of what happens to her, and to yourself. These others, they're not going to be aware of much of anything. They'll hardly feel the pain of what's happening. But you, you're going to hear and see and feel everything. Paulus wanted to give you the needle just like the others but I said no. You almost got me into a lot of trouble tonight, and I'm going to see you pay for that."

"Also," Cam said, "you're going to have your fun taunting me a little bit before the event. Right? Although from the way you were looking at me earlier, you had in mind some other brand of fun."

Her beady eyes brightened with red fire. "You think I'm so hot for your body? I can tell you this, brother. I can get any man in this commune any time I want him. That's a fact."

Cam's laugh now was one of derision. "It's also a fact that you're part of the Inner Circle or whatever you call it. I don't doubt that your sex life owes itself more to that, than to your womanly charms."

The goad worked. Vinna's knife flashed as she charged him. Instantly Cam's palms flattened against the top of the altar, his weight shifting to them and his body arching upward. Spreading his knees apart and lurching his legs in a circular motion toward the stone slab, his timing was perfect. The movement was to the right and his right leg parried the steel blade

effectively, just as his left leg, now scissoring the other, effectively vised the girl's head between his two iron-like thighs. Adding a final twist to his downward chest-first crash to the top of the stone, the sound of Vinna's neck cracking finished the business.

He extricated himself from alter and girl, the latter of which rolled from the other end of the stone and lay face up, staring blankly at the rafters, her tongue lolling out of the side of her mouth.

Now to wrench loose the chains from the stone!

Easier said than done. The chains were locked to a thick steel spike that had been driven deeply into the top of the stone and then sealed with what looked to be a black epoxy. Whatever it was, that spike wasn't going to yield. As for the chains themselves, they were made of steel at least an inch in circumference. But every chain has its weakest link, at least that's what they say. What they don't say, Cam realized, is that the weakest link in a strong chain can defy even the strength of a man such as himself. It took less than a minute and a half of tendon-and-muscle straining in which his veins stood out like cords of taut rope for Cam to decide that he wasn't going to make it. Not this way.

He considered the lock at the spike end. He was an expert at opening sealed doors and containers. But experts needed the proper tools, and he had none. But maybe by hanging it on the stone.

But at that point he heard someone at the outside door.

Paulus Aliester paused before entering the barn.

The uneasy feeling had come back to him again, the feeling that he ought to get out while the getting was good, before it was too late to get out. The man Vinna had brought out was a cop, there was no doubt about that. The way the man fought. Five of his Family dead. Fortunately all the witnesses as well as two of the victims were of the Inner Circle. Unlike them, the common members might not understand how a single man, no matter how large or skilled with his body, could kill two higher initiates who had full measures of the Family's Power!

Paulus had wanted to have the big man slain right there and then, in fact was about to deliver the command when one of his circle seemed to make the order unnecessary by preparing a fatal dagger thrust. But then Vinna had stopped him, arguing that she wanted to see him die in ceremony with his full faculties, so that at the end he would know what it meant to run against the grain of those of the commune. Paulus could have countermanded her order, but he chose not to. Vinna was a peculiar bitch. Mean and spiteful. Oftentimes he had thought of having her done away with, but to himself at least, he admitted being just a little afraid of her.

Unsettling, very. But he had an additional reason to feel unsettled. The very night itself. Now, before entering the barn, he looked about him, around and above. The night was. . . .

Well, strange. The moon looked pale gray and seemed to cast a light that was colder than normal. And while the clouds seemed to be moving along

high above, the air around the farm was still, quiet, as if waiting for something to happen. Something.

He shrugged off the mood, or tried to. He had things to do. Always he checked out the barn prior to a ceremony. He had to do this personally, for he alone knew exactly how certain elements of the rites were accomplished. To the common members, what happened was sheer magic; the Inner Circle, however much they might feel deep down that it was more on the order of hocus-pocus slight of hand, still had to respect his methods which were unknown to them. All, perhaps, with the exception of Vinna. Speaking of whom . . .

He opened the door and saw her.

He stood stone-still, as if he were a piece of marble which had been carved in an imbalanced posture of surprise. She—she lay crumpled on her back, her face white with disbelief, her mouth and tongue . . .

Paulus Aliester screamed.

The mood for the moment was broken by the sound of his voice returning from the rafters back to his own ears. Then another sound, another voice came to him:

“Take care, Paulus, lest I smite thee also.”

“Y—you?” He pointed a shaking finger toward his chained captive. “You did this? How, how could you? Your chains do not reach this far!”

Cam chose his words carefully, imitating to the best of his ability the intonations of the Count.

“You yourself have called upon this house the spirit of destruction, Paulus Aliester. So shall it be destroyed, when the sign is given.”

Paulus' head began to shake. "N-no. You're a cop, and that's all you are. You might have died back there at the house. You would have died had not Vinna wanted—"

A deep laugh. "And who controlled her wants at that moment? Who stopped you from slaying me, who?"

"*Vinna!* You did nothing! You could do nothing! You were unconscious!"

"I did not say it was I, Paulus Aliester."

"Then *who?*"

"Perhaps . . . perhaps you shall see. Vinna saw, at that last instant. Then, she saw."

Cam let his voice trail off. He had been sitting comfortably on the far end of the stone altar. There he remained, completely passive. The smile on his face mirrored a sense of trivial amusement, something very far from what he felt. It was a gamble, all of it, but he had no choice. The gamble Harmon had entered into had been a matter of choice, but not this. No, Cam Sanchez would save his skin this night only if he could keep it, could put off losing it.

And in the meantime he could set the mood for what, hopefully, was to come.

Even so, in the next few minutes he was impressed by the comeback which Paulus Aliester exhibited. He had remained open-mouthed, staring first at Cam, then at Vinna. Suddenly from the doorway two voices came. One was the man named Harvey, whom Cam recognized under his hood. The other was a freckle-faced youth, male or female.

"Paulus!" Harvey cried. "We heard you yell!"

The other entrant pointed to the dead girl on the floor. "What happened to *her*?"

Paulus' face took on an expression of complete tranquility as he turned to the two.

"It was not my scream you heard, but that of she who lies slain."

Harvey shot a frightened look at Cam. "H-him?"

"Hardly," Paulus replied. "I myself struck her down. She has betrayed the Family. It was she who brought this man to the Farm. She has paid for it with her life, just as Cricket has. As for you, Harvey."

"*Paulus!*"

"You, I spare. Not from beneficence alone, but conditionally. You shall repeat to all the flock what has been done here tonight. The fact that you continue to live shall be my insurance that you continue to inform others what happens when they do not think in terms of the Family's good, when they act with stupidity, and when they anger me. Am I understood?"

"Yes, Paulus."

"That is good. Now I wish you to take what remains of Vinna back to the house. You will put her to rest in the dungeon room. You will also inform all of my flock that they are to view her body before coming to tonight's ceremony. Be quick about it!"

The final sentence snapped out like a whip, and both of Paulus' subjects cracked into obedience. Cam considered a scoffing laugh, but reconsidered. He wanted to see just what Paulus Aliester had up his sleeve for the next move.

To his surprise, he was ignored. The High Priest walked around the stone altar, keeping well away

from the chained man, and, making certain that none of his brothers or sisters were present, swept back the curtains. There appeared to be nothing behind the satin except the roughhewn upright beams and the wall they supported. With a sudden motion of Paulus' hand, however, he disabused Cam of that notion. A section of one of the uprights slid from its placement, revealing a box of levers. Paulus checked them out one by one. As he did so, the flames of the wall torches began to raise and lower, then to change from bright red to pale green to ice blue, and then complete darkness. More levers were touched and the sounds of muffled thunder and whining wind came from the rafters above.

It was all very clever. And effective.

One more lever was touched. And Cam was alone in the barn, the High Priest having slipped through the resultant opening in the side of the wall, an opening which now itself disappeared noiselessly as the panel moved back into place. Simultaneously, the mechanical section of the upright containing the controls was again covered.

Very effective, Cam decided.

And now again the lighting in the room began to shift in intensity and shade. Likewise came the thunder and wind sounds. Then silence. Obviously there was a duplicate set of controls outside the structure.

Pure charlatanism, yet . . .

It worked, there was no doubt about it. It had worked to place Paulus Aliester on the high throne of control from which he looked down upon his subjects. Cam was hoping he'd still be among the living

when the mighty was toppled when something stirred to his right. His eyes turned toward the movement. He tried to lift his hands.

“No,” he said. “*Don’t!*”

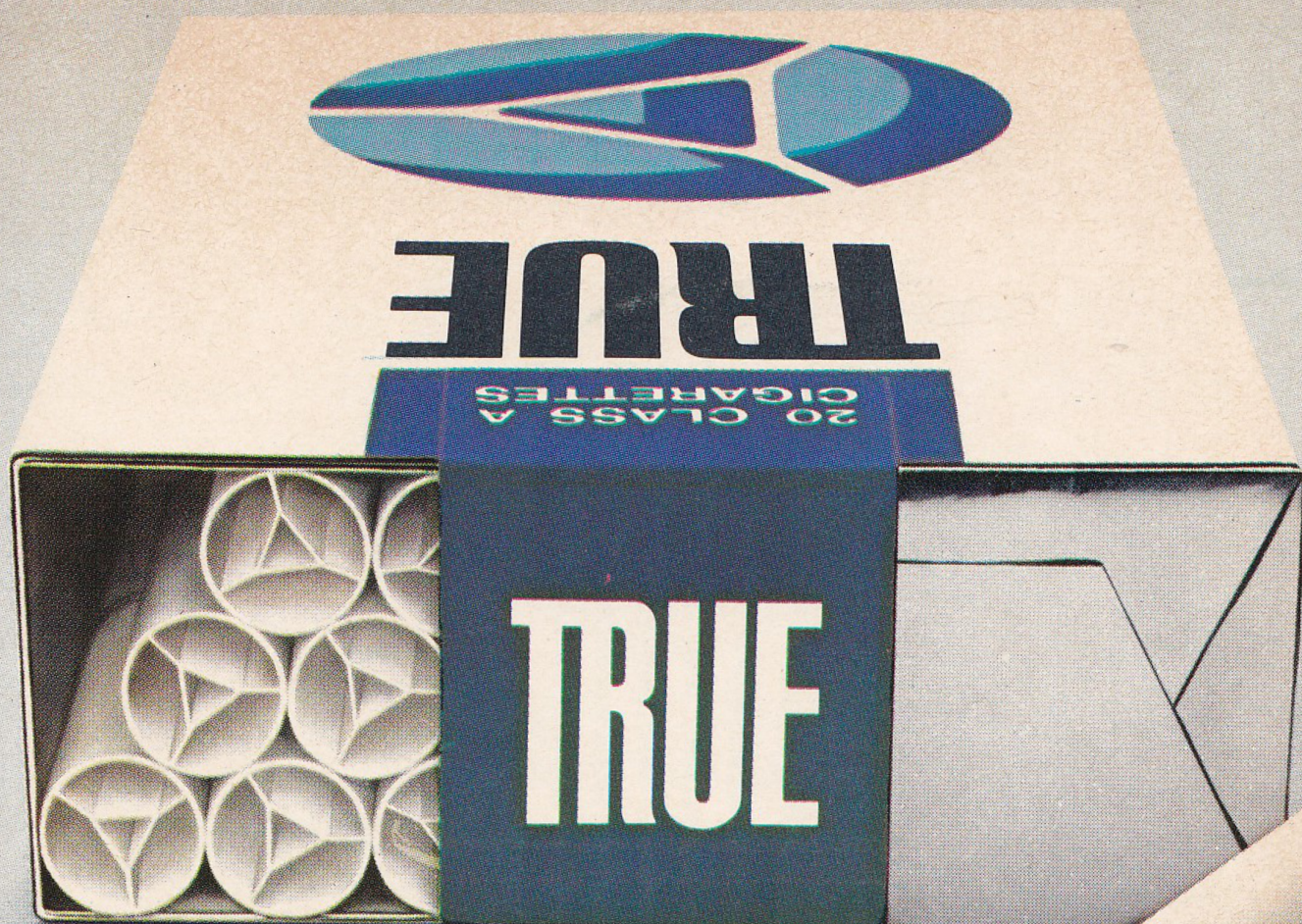
Outside, just the other side of the place on the interior wall where the control device was located, Paulus had recamouflaged the second, exterior, lever box. Making sure that no one was in sight on the hill this side of the barn, he slipped out from behind the thorny bushes he had had planted at this spot. All was well. It was a nuisance having to check out all of the equipment, but this was another of those matters that the High Priest had to keep to himself. It was an insurance policy of sorts, making sure that no one else in the organization could duplicate his tricks and therefore would not readily feel able to take over his lofty position. Vinna, for one, might have.

Vinna!

Again the full force of how she had looked came to him. He had handled the aftermath as well as possible, he thought, but Lord, how she’d looked! The big man *must* have done it.

But how? She was nowhere near him, and besides not only were his hands chained to the stone but his ankles were tied. But the fact was that Vinna was dead, horribly dead, as the look on her face testified. And if the big man had *not* done it, who?

Who? The big man had asked him that. “*Who controlled her wants? Who stopped you from slaying me?*”



Latest U.S. Government
tests of all cigarettes
show True is
lower in both
tar and nicotine
than 98% of all other
cigarettes sold.



Think about it.
Shouldn't your next cigarette be True?

Regular: 12 mg. "tar", 0.7 mg. nicotine,
Menthol: 12 mg. "tar", 0.8 mg. nicotine, av. per cigarette, FTC Report Feb. '73.



Latest U.S. Government
tests of all menthol
cigarettes show
True is lower
in both tar and
nicotine than 98% of
all other menthols sold.

Think about it.
Shouldn't your next cigarette be True?

Warning: The Surgeon General Has Determined
That Cigarette Smoking Is Dangerous to Your Health.

The spirit of destruction, he had said. "*You have called it upon this house.*"

But there were no spirits of destruction, nor spirits of any other kind! That was superstition, the belief of fools! And yet if he was a believer in omens. . . .

That gray moon, looking more than ever tonight like the Primeval Orb the medieval *grimoires* spoke of. The jagged clouds that moved across its face and hung there like flint-edged boulders and crags which were awaiting just a small sound, before they came hurtling to earth in a rolling tumbling, tearing, life-crushing avalanche. And here below, the stillness remained; seeming to know, to be aware that this was a moment in time in which nature itself could afford no error. Not when faced with almost certain destruction.

No, he was allowing his imagination to run away with itself again. But tonight, after the ceremonies, he would make his decision. The decision probably would be to leave this place and these people. Just as probably he would leave tonight. After all, there was no reason why he could not take his three special nuns with him. Yes, he would tell them that this community now had developed to the point where it did not need his guidance. He was called elsewhere to do his noble work. Yes, there was no *probably* about it. He would leave tonight, after the ceremonies.

But might that not be too late, Paulus?

The question, asked by one part of his mind, was not answered by the other. There was no chance.

From within the barn came a scream that chilled him to the very marrow of his bones.

"Don't," Cam Sanchez had warned the girl—not Jenny, but the younger one. At her sudden movement he had turned to see that her glazed eyes had regained a measure of clarity. The drug had begun to wear off. And with that clarity came another: the recognition of her situation. She looked at her chained hands, then at the other girl standing statuelike beside her, then at Cam.

Then she screamed bloody murder.

"Please. That will do no good," Cam attempted, then realized that a naked man of his size and proportions could do very little to comfort a child who no doubt had never seen an unclothed male before, and in all probability had never been naked before a man herself. Not to mention the shock of awaking from a limbolike sleep and finding herself chained in a strange barn.

Even beyond these things, there was more to her screams. They did not cease, and began to be formed into shrieking words. They were not sentences, not even full phrases, but they communicated some of the horror her memory was trying desperately to release from within. Some of them he could recognize:

"Muuurrrdddeeerrr! They killlllll. . . . oh, his head! . . . the ax! Godddddd . . . now the shotgun . . . her faaaaaaaaaaaaaae! All dead . . . allllllll!"

There were more words, and Cam actually felt relieved when the needle Paulus Aliester thrust into the child's shoulder began to do its work. Screams turned to cries and trembling, then to murmers, then whispers. Then she was again as before.

Paulus turned toward Cam, looked at the needle in

his hand and gazed thoughtfully back at his bullet-headed captive.

"Try it," Cam said. The challenge was unmistakable.

Paulus smiled weakly. "No. Vinna shall have what she wanted. Because that is now what I desire as well. I want you to die knowing, and screaming your lungs out when you breathe your last." He looked at Cam now with a new aura of confidence, a smile that was an advertisement of renewed self-assurance.

"Around here, big man, in case you haven't noticed, that's the way things happen. The way I want them to."

He turned on his heel and moved toward the door. Watching him, Cam thought better of saying what he thought. Namely, that in all probability things would not quite happen the way Paulus Aliester desired or planned, or even thought possible. And there was something else Cam was thinking. That, no matter how things went, there was one consideration that was paramount. The survival of the two girls and himself.

CHAPTER 9

Harvey Bellman was destined to attend the night's ceremonies.

Harvey Bellman did not think so, however. He was anticipating nothing more than his lonely vigil on the knob of the hill just west of the barn. He had been told an hour previously by one of the Inner Circle that he was one of the six members who would draw shotgun duty. Three were posted on rises around the ceremonial hall, their positions forming an irregular triangle with his location closest to the structure. The other three were farther out toward the highway, watching to be sure no law enforcement body was descending upon them en masse. At normal times in the life of the commune, these three were always posted, but without weapons, just World War II style walkie-talkies. At ceremony times, the guns were added to the equipment to be used, not against a group of police, but to gun down lone stragglers. The inner three guards were posted only on nights like these, when the Ceremony of Sustaining the Power was performed, when the blood of the sacrificed would further enhance the energy of the Family. Exactly how that energy transformation was accomplished, Harvey didn't know, but he knew that the Power of the Fami-

ly was great. Just earlier he had seen an example of it: when Paulus had killed Vinna just using the strength of his mind. And Vinna was one of the Inner Circle, too; or she had been. All of which testified to Paulus' power.

But Harvey needed no such demonstrations. He knew from even more personal experience how great the Family was. Before he had joined he had been a nobody. Even today, when he was in the city, people would look at him and think he was a nobody. But he wore the Medallion, and that made all the difference in the world, even if nobody but other members of the cult recognized it.

Sure, sometimes it was kind of scary, especially when Paulus or one of the other higher-ups thought he'd done something wrong. He had been terrified earlier tonight when Paulus had threatened him. But no doubt Paulus knew, by his own methods, that bringing the big Mexican here hadn't been his decision, that it had been Vinna's. Nonetheless, he would obey the command Paulus had given him, he would tell all the rest how Vinna had gotten what she deserved because she had been careless; in fact, he already had begun obeying, having told a group at the house directly after leaving the barn.

"The Family has Power."

At the opening chant of the ritual, Harvey looked at his watch. It was fifteen until midnight, exactly right. The first chants would be those that began all the various rites, and tonight would last for fifteen minutes. They would be led by members of the Inner Circle, one of whom, at the twelfth stroke of twelve,

would invoke the presence of Paulus, who, among the roll of thunder and the ebbing torchlight, would then appear among them as if by magic. But it was not magic, not really. It was just another demonstration of the Power. "When one has the Power," Paulus had explained to them, "nothing is magical. All is natural, even those things which the ignorant believe to be supernatural."

"All of the Family are of the Power."

This was certainly true, even though sometimes Harvey doubted that he personally was powerful. Yet it had to be so. Paulus said it was. Not only that, if the Family as a whole had the Power, it stood to reason that so did its constituent parts.

"The Power is as old as Time, as far-reaching as Space."

Harvey mouthed the words silently with those inside the barn. Oh, how he wanted to be in there with them all tonight. Especially tonight, after what had happened earlier. Surely he, more than some of the others, needed the Power within him regenerated. He had watched with envy as his brothers and sisters had filed down from the main house and the sleeping quarters to enter the ceremonial hall. He had wanted so much to be with them, to feel their solidarity, their unity of purpose. Yet he had been chosen for this task, this special service that carried with it a measure of responsibility. And even though not very many prowlers had been found this close to the buildings, it was sure true that they caught that girl here today, one of the ones who would be sacrificed.

Harvey pulled his hood higher up around his head.

He felt cold. He always did when he thought of how those who were sacrificed died. He did not like death, did not like to think about it. It was different when you were down there and actually *seeing* the sacrifices. When you were *right there*, you recognized, both in your mind and deep down inside you, that it was a necessary thing. If no one was sacrificed, the Power would not be regenerated. It was a thing that *had to be*.

"The Power is brighter than the Sun, darker than the Abyss."

Dark. It surely was, the night, that is. Harvey strained his eyes to see down to the bottom of the hillock. You could hardly make out anything. But no problem. He had his shotgun. By the time anybody got close enough to—well, *bang!* He'd have him. But it sure was dark, down at the bottom of his hill, at least. Funny how the moonlight could do things like that. Dark where he was, but over on the other hills where the other guards were . . .

He scratched his chin reflectively. Strange. Not more than five minutes ago, at the most, ten, he'd been able to make out the silhouettes of his two counterparts. Now he saw no one. Could something have happened?

He laughed a short, nervous laugh. No. Probably they just were sitting down on the job. If he were smart, he'd probably do the same thing. But the ground was so cold.

But if the ground were so cold, how come the other two?"

He laughed again, and brought his walkie-talkie to

his mouth. "Hey, you guys on the hill. This is Harvey. Are you okay?"

Pressing the "receive" button, he heard nothing but the wheeze of the open communication channel.

"Hey, come on, you guys. If you can hear me, answer. Is everything okay?"

Again, nothing in response.

"Now, *look*—quit joking around. If you don't answer right away I'm going to report you. Do you hear me?"

This time there was a reply, but a strange one. A low chuckle came through. At least, that's what it sounded like.

All right, they were having some fun with him, that was it. But they shouldn't be doing it right now. Not when they were supposed to be on guard duty. Unless, they weren't having some fun with him, and something really had happened.

"Hey, *come on now!* Look, I can't see you or anything! Just let me know that you're okay."

He stopped short. There, down on the other side of the barn, between two of the other hills and the structure, somebody was moving! It was a *big* somebody, wearing a cloak. Sure, probably one of the members, maybe one of the Inner Circle, coming down from the hill to be sure that the guards were in place. Except the cloak didn't appear to have a hood, and it looked a deeper shade of black than the usual kind.

But, no. All that meant was that he didn't have the hood pulled up to his head. As for the color, who could really distinguish red from black on a night like this? Yet . . .

He looked so *big*. Bigger even than that Mexican, and Harvey was hard put to recall any member of the Family who looked that tall and that powerful.

"Powerful is the Family, and all who belong."

Maybe. But just to be sure, maybe a check wouldn't hurt. The guy now was moving around behind the barn and starting—to come up this way!

"Hey, look, you guys. If you're up there, you'd better answer me, because otherwise I'm gonna blow the brains out of the guy I see coming up here. *Do you hear me?*"

The shotgun was a double-barreled job loaded with ten-gauge shot. With a gulp, Harvey pulled back both hammers. As he did so, he saw that the figure approaching him looked somehow older than he'd expected. Sort of like a man in his fifties, with a skin that was white.

And then the shadows at the bottom of Harvey's hill swallowed up the figure so that he could not be seen at all clearly.

Nervously, Harvey aimed his gun.

Then a thought struck him.

He laughed to himself. Of course! It was a test. Maybe even by Paulus himself. He checked his watch. Eleven fifty-five. Sure. Paulus didn't have to be inside the barn until the twelfth stroke of twelve. Maybe he always did this to check on the efficiency of the guards. Making sure that they were doing their duty. Well, he would show Paulus that he could be trusted! Yes, indeed! Probably *he* had told the other guards not to answer him, to see if he had courage. And suddenly Harvey was more than happy to be out here,

outside of the barn where the others were. Because right now he had the chance to prove to Paulus that the High Priest had been right in not punishing him.

But suppose it wasn't Paulus?

Who else could it be? Everyone else was inside.

Consider: he really looked nothing like Paulus did, and he came from the hill where one of the other guards . . .

Could not now be seen! Neither of them.

But what did that really mean? Nothing. On the other hand—

But, really, what difference did it make? If it was an interloper, somebody who had no business being here, then Harvey's course of action was clear. Get the drop on him with the shotgun. And if it was Paulus, checking the guards, the same course of action applied. If only he knew which!

And if only he could *see* the man.

But he couldn't, and that was that. But he knew the direction the man was coming from, and he knew where he had last lost sight of him. Exactly. All he would have to do is back down the other side of the hill, the opposite side, and when the oncomer reached the crest he would be silhouetted against the sky. At which point, he would be in Harvey's gunsights and in Harvey's power. But, if he was a stranger, that meant he had done something to the other two guards!

"The Power brings enlightenment as to the course of those who have it."

Correct, Harvey thought as he lowered his body into a crouch and began to edge down backwards.

Easy now, with no noise. Then his heel caught in something. Something that was not a rock nor a root of a tree but something *alive*. Something which seemed to push against his lower Achilles tendon with a firm pressure toward his front, something which held firm.

He lost his balance and began the fall that sent him rolling several feet down from the crest of the hill. It was when he lifted his face upward that he realized two things.

The first was the cause of his tumble. It was a large black cat, the largest he had ever seen. Its eyes seemed to burn with a pale green fire. The second was that the shotgun was no longer with him. He had thrust it from himself in the attempt to regain his balance. He could see its double barrel reflecting the light of the gray moon.

And then he realized a third thing.

His heart almost stopped in its place. Up on the ridge now, the one upon which he stood, loomed something . . .

Something hideous!

It was in the shape of a man with arms outstretched. The hands, which looked to be gloved, were spread as if they were claws. Below them, the cape the thing wore hung down in a manner that resembled wings. Hard, jagged wings like those of a fierce bird of prey, a bat. The man, if it was a man, stood with his feet together so that the tapering effect added to the bird-bat impression. But it was the thing's head which . . .

Harvey yanked his eyes free from that horrible face!

The gun. Yes, the gun!

But between the shotgun and where he now crouched in fear was that great cat, its back arched and teeth bared.

Harvey pivoted on his heel and rose, preparing to run. But his feet suddenly could not move! He could not run, all he could do was turn around. Turn, and face the grotesque thing whose breathing he now could hear plainly in the death-still night. Turn. And try to scream.

Try, because that was all he could do. Open his mouth and try. No sound came out. It was like the times at the ceremonies, when the sacrificial victims tried to scream and couldn't. And now he found he could not even take his eyes from that face that was coming closer still!

"Look upon your doom, Harvey Bellmann. Look upon the doom that brings you your final hour."

The voice was deep and strange, as if it were speaking a foreign language. More than that. It was as if spoken language itself was foreign to the communicator. It was not a reaction original to Harvey Bellmann; others had experienced the same thought upon hearing those tones. Most of the others had cause, just as did Harvey, to tremble at the hearing.

And at the *seeing*.

No part of the face looked natural, normal. It was as if the mold of its form had begun with the components of a human head, then pushed and pulled at the clay with frenzied abandon until satisfied that the

final product was one of fiendish exaggeration and distortion.

The ear. Starting much lower on the jaw than those of normal men and reaching high into the sides of the head, they tapered into sharply pointed endings which grew inward into the mass of long black hair.

Hair. It surrounded the broad forehead and converged at the center, meeting below the two furrowed black wings which were the thing's eyebrows.

The eyes were fierce, like those of a beast of prey. Moon-white at the edges with black and purple centers.

Flared nostrils connecting to a thick and upturned nose, and below was the mouth. Lips drawn far back, unable to close over those sharp white fangs. Long as fingers, they shot upward and downward, their edges showing evidences of blood. On the teeth and the entire lower jaw and spattered blotches around the eyes.

Again Harvey Bellmann looked into *those eyes*. And now he saw that there was blood even there. What had before looked to be pure white now was a series of cross-hatchings of lightning-like streaks of pink and red.

Harvey winced. He could not look at those eyes any longer. Then the pit of his stomach went stone-cold. He could not *not* look at those eyes. He could not avert his gaze, could not even close his eyelids. *He could move no part of his body!*

"Do you not wish you could scream, Harvey Bellmann?"

Yes, oh please yes!

"But there is no need to scream, no need to move, no need to speak. In moments you will have need for nothing. You will see. I will show you."

No! I don't want to die, I don't want. . . .

And then Harvey Bellmann could not remember what it was he did not want. His mind was not listening to any remembrances, was instead totally concentrating on the center of those two great orbs which now were like a pair of dark planets moving at a speed faster than light, moving against a backdrop of the stars, moving in, then down, then . . .

No more could they be seen, but the mind of Harvey Bellmann now was occupied with a new sensation, the sense of something against his throat. It was not painful, or if in fact it had been painful, it only was so for an instant—but warm. No, hot—searingly hot. Two things inserted themselves among the cords and tendons, flooding them with that fire which now was spreading down to his shoulders and chest and at the same time down through his arms. Down and out, pulsing with the beat of his heart which drummed its rhythms pounding through his brain. And then, when his body was full of the spasming burning fire, when there was no corner, no joint, no corpuscle of his system free of the fever, the fever began to retract. It was as if that point which now was the center of his being, that place under his jaw and above his breast, that place which surely was blistered and ashen, could provide its solar energy no longer. As if it was calling that energy back into itself.

Leaving *nothing* behind it!

He felt it first at his extremities, his fingers and

toes. A coldness, then no feeling at all. Swiftly the warmth moved upward to shin and knee, to forearm and elbow. No more did he have fingers and toes, hands and feet. If indeed they still were attached to him, they were no longer *his* and therefore they did not matter anymore. This then was what it was like to die, to lose something that did not matter? To lose energy, power. To lose the Power.

The Power is brighter than the Sun, darker than the Abyss.

It was true! And now Harvey Bellmann saw how right everything had been. It was necessary for the sacrificial victims to be slain. The Power had to be regenerated, and that could only be done by blood. For he knew now that it was his life's blood which was being drained from him, and that soon he would lose it from his chest and his heart and his brain. And it would make no difference because there would be nothing left to feel the loss. Nothing but the blood which had gone from him, and that would be somewhere else, somewhere mingling with other blood.

And his mind realized one further truth: *Blood is the Power!* Then there was no longer any mind to realize anything at all.

"Barrier, barrier, that none may pass—save he who has the Power!"

Outside the barn, hidden in the bushes which surrounded him, Paulus Aliester steeled his teeth. It was the beginning of the chant that was his cue. In a matter of moments now, he would press the proper levers and appear miraculously before his flock. Always this

had been the high point of the ceremonies for him. Not the blood-letting, not even the final incantation which he always delivered to an audience so quiet and respectful that they dared not breathe audibly. No, it was this, his dramatic entrance and the complete awe with which all eyes filled themselves with his person. It was an entrance worthy of a god.

But tonight even the anticipation of the others' awe did not serve to exhilarate him. As he peered into the box, making sure that his fingers touched the correct controls, he realized that perhaps he had taken a bit too much of the Scotch which had served to heighten his euphoria. But that was not his problem.

Damn the darkness of the night! Damn his feeling of uncertainty that would not go away! Damn his inability to see the tops of the three hills and thus reassure himself that his guards were on duty! Damn the quiet of the night, that still-death quiet, and the interruptions of before.

There had been two, only two, but both were disturbing. There had been what had sounded like the flapping of heavy wings from above him. Then there had been a soft thud, as if something had landed on the top of the roof of the barn. The two sounds in conjunction had conjured up the image of a fire-breathing dragon—or a leering Satan with leathery wings.

Too much Scotch, definitely.

"Barrier of Heaven and Earth and the Nether Regions. . . ."

Almost time, just a couple of lines more. But those sounds. No, if something really had landed up there,

the guards would have seen it. And what could make sounds like that? Other than a dragon and a devil? He forced himself to laugh inwardly. Imagination. He really was slipping over the edge. It was good that he made his decision. He was sure now that it had been the right one. He would leave tonight, take the three girls with him.

"Barrier, barrier, that none may pass—save he who has the Power!"

Paulus hit the proper levers. As he readied himself for his entrance the thought occurred to him that there was a trapdoor up on the barn roof, one that he'd previously thought of using for a special effect but had discarded the idea. What if?

Too much Scotch, dammit!

The timing was, as usual, perfect. As the torch-lights began to dim, the special entry-panel slid back into its receptacle in the wall of the barn. At the instant that the great room was in total darkness, Paulus was through the opening and the satin wall-hanging that hid it. The blackness lasted for but the space of five or six heartbeats but it was enough. At the crash of thunder provided by the concealed speaker in the ceiling, the torches again flickered into multi-colored light. And there, before all of the awestruck and worshipful eyes of the Family and all its members; there before the great stone altar to which the sacrificial victims were chained; there cloaked in the rich red satin cloak which was his symbol of office, and with his hands raised as if they were sending the Power over and down among the heads of the faith-

ful; there stood Paulus Aliester, High Priest of a cult, the inner mysteries of which were known only to himself.

"The barrier has been passed!" he cried.

"The barrier has been passed!" came the response.

"He who has the Power has broken the barrier!"

"The Power has broken the barrier!"

"Tonight the laws of Nature are fulfilled!"

"The laws of Nature are no secret to her who has the Power!"

"Tonight the laws of Nature will be fulfilled!"

"So must it be!"

Solemnly: "Yet the laws we follow differ from the laws of man."

In a similar manner: "What are the laws of man but makeshift rules? They have no relation to the truth of things. It is only by chance when they coincide with the laws of Nature."

"Verily."

"Verily."

"I say verily!"

"Verily!"

In a high-pitched scream: *"Verily!"*

"VERILY!"

Then silence.

Then movement, as the members of the Inner Circle, the eleven of them remaining, move to him. Three carry torches and two of these station themselves at the ends of the altar, close but not too close to those who will be sacrificed. The third torch is passed to Paulus. Then another of the Circle, a girl, bows before the High Priest. She carries something in

her hands. It is large and black and hairy, and Paulus lowers his head to receive it, then as the girl steps back, her hands grasping his robe, he lifts his head and torch dramatically.

All of the congregation rise before the naked man with the head of the horned goat, who in a whisper begins the final series of invocations.

“Let all the world try to contain it, the Power which is regenerated knows no restraint.”

And now in hushed unison, all:

*“May the jaws of Gada close upon it
May the snare of Ea grasp it
May the net of Nisaba entrap it. . . .”*

Now all that remains is to complete this affirmation of the Power’s strength and the inability of lesser powers in its face, then the call to the spirits of the nether regions. Then the sacrifices.

And then it is over, Paulus was thinking. Over, and that will be good. And now, for the first time since entering the great room, he took the opportunity to study the big Mexican who was chained to his left. A flash of hatred shot through his backbone. The man was an almost perfect human specimen, his large naked muscles fitting his solid frame well. Solid and powerful. *Powerful!* Perhaps in body, but what did his strength amount to when confronted with that commanded by the scrawny and ill-formed Paulus Al-
iester? It was as if nothing! Just as the jaws of Gada, the snare of Ea! It was as if nothing at all.

Even so, the man’s face betrayed a confidence

which Paulus did not like. He had not expected the Mexican to scream and carry on—not yet anyway, not until that final moment when torch and dagger were brought to him. At that instant, there would be some sort of struggle, but Paulus was prepared for that. Those of his Inner Circle had been cautioned to use their knives in conjunction with his if it proved necessary. But now, right now, the man's eyes should have shown some fear, and they did not. His facial muscles should have been tense, but they were not; in fact, the lips were curved slightly upward, almost but not quite forming a smile of mockery.

It was almost as if he had been drugged like the others. But, no, his eyes were clear. Perhaps it was just that he had become resigned to his fate, knowing there was no escape. Perhaps, but the man had shown he was a fighter and Paulus would not have expected him to give up so easily. Now and again the Mexican's eyes would lift to the rafters. Following their gaze, Paulus saw nothing. The darkness up there was made darker still by the brightness of the torch he held in his hand. But what could there be up there to see anyway?

Those beating wings, that thump . . .

Nonsense.

And now he realized that the congregation before him was silent. They knelt in reverence, all but those of the Inner Circle, each of whom were looking at him. Of course. He was to begin the invocation to the Spirits.

*“Lucifuge . . . Satanachia . . . Agaliarep . . .
Fleuret . . . Sargatana . . . Nebiros.”*

These, the six, were the grand generals of the Nether World, subject only to the Great Four whose Names Never Were Uttered. And now it was for the congregation to speak the names, of the six again, intoning after each the names of the three most powerful spirits commanded by them.

"Fleuret . . . Bathim . . . Pursan . . . Abigar . . ."

To call them up, to make them bear witness that the Power was being regenerated to the Family, to make them understand that no force—not even the force of all of them combined—could now counter the will of this gathering.

"Sargatanas . . . Loray . . . Valefar . . . Forau . . ."

And yet if these spirits really did exist, what better time to obstruct the Family's will than now, before the Power was reinstated? Ridiculous! Even so, those beating wings, leathery sounding, like those pictured on the demons of Hell . . .

No. Get on with it, Paulus. It is time for the fire and blade.

Free your mind of this foolishness and concentrate on the present thing to be done. Decide, now, who shall be first? The young girl, the other, the trespasser, or the man. The man . . .

Again his eyes were focused above them. Automatically, those of Paulus followed. This time the space between himself and the high rafters was not empty.

Paulus screamed as the dark thing hurtled downward and stopped. Ten feet above the barn floor it jerked to a halt, suspended in space at a point between the altar and the kneeling congregation.

Other screams now were added to those of the

High Priest as the body of Harvey Bellmann, hanging by the heels, rotated slowly on the thick hemp and displayed, for all to see, the gaping slash in his throat and a blood-drained face of ashen-gray.

CHAPTER 10

The screams and confusion of the rising worshippers made a chaotic bedlam, but not for long. Down from the rafters came another thing—a gigantic winged thing which for a moment hovered over the stone altar, and then seemed to dissolve into an apparition which in turn transformed itself into a man.

He wore a thick black cape loosely wrapped about his huge frame. Under the cape were the trappings of formal dinner dress complete with black tie. His was the face of royalty accustomed to being obeyed. Thus, in spite of their fear, in spite of their previous confusion, those who had a moment ago been fighting hardest to reach the exit did not find it overly strange that they felt compelled to obey his first command. Directed to all, it seemed nevertheless to be directed to each as an individual. His black-gloved fingers seemed to be pointing toward each as his words, spoken quietly, somehow boomed with cutting clarity into the brains of all.

“There will be stillness!”

And silently all again knelt before this man in black. As they did so, his mocking laugh chilled them to the marrow of their bones.

“So you have the Power, do you? So you command

the force of Nature Herself, is that not what I have heard you say? You fear not the jaws of Gada nor the snare of Ea? If that is so, then why should you tremble before myself whose jaws in comparison are as a baby's, whose snare is as mist? If you dare to evoke the names of those you know as the captains of the Dark Regions, why should you feel fear when your call is answered by one such as myself, the lowly Son of the Dragon?"

Dragon. The word pounded into Paulus Aliester's brain. Earlier, when he had heard those wings, he had thought . . .

But now he realized that the being on the altar had turned and was staring down at himself!

"And you, the High Priest! You wear the goat-head of Pan and Satan, but acknowledge that their real names are not to be uttered. Your presumption is abominable to my eyes. Remove the mask."

Docilely, Paulus obeyed.

Count Dracula smiled. He turned his gaze back to the congregation. "You wish to see examples of the Power of your Family, the Power of Nature and the Abyss? Before this night is over, you shall have your evidence that such exists. First, however, I would ask questions of your leader."

"Behind the altar!" Cam suddenly said. "There's a syringe. I think it contains pentothal."

Dracula's smile widened. "There will be no need for such crude methods of eliciting the truth. I shall be told what I wish to know. Is that not true, High Priest?"

Paulus nodded, unable to avert his wide eyes from those of the man in black.

“But to be sure the answers I gather are in the nature of truth, perhaps a demonstration of my Power might be in order.” His eyes fell on one of the Inner Circle, a young man of twenty-five who held one of the torches. The two sets of eyes locked, those of the Count emitting white phosphorescent clouds that flashed momentarily, then died. The young man’s eyes remained open, his jaw now slack.

“You will do as I say, will you not?”

The young man could not answer by voice, he could only move his head sluggishly in an up-and-down motion.

“Excellent. That torch you carry. It is heavy, is it not?”

Again the bob.

“Would you like to rid yourself of the burden?”

The head signalled yes.

“You shall do so. But one does not set down a burning torch, does one? No. Therefore it will have to be extinguished in some way. But what way? Ah! Of course. Water is very good for extinguishing flame, is it not? Yes. But where to find water? Did you know, young man with the heavy, burning torch, that the human body has a very high percentage of water in its composition? Some seventy percent, it is said. Unfortunately, most of that precious water is found *inside* the body, yes? Yes. Therefore, the way to get to it, without the nastiness of slicing up one’s self, is through the mouth. And, therefore, it follows that

this is how the torch must be extinguished. Am I understood?"

Another slow nod.

"Excellent. Extinguish the torch."

The searing sound of the flesh of the boy's face made Cam turn his head, but his senses could not escape the stench that now permeated the room. It remained there, even after the charred head of the lad lay face down on the floor, the still flickering firebrand beneath his body.

Paulus Aliester felt the vomit rising in his throat, but had not the control to stifle it. Gagging, he felt it gush from his mouth and down to the altar before him. His stomach, thighs and shins had been splattered by his sick upheaval, which the demon above now referred to mockingly.

"You, High Priest, profane your own altar! I also note that you too hold a torch as did your brother. Would you like to extinguish it in a similar manner?"

The vision of the other youth, trying to stuff the fire into his mouth screamed again into Paulus' brain. "N-no!"

"Very well. We do need light in here anyway. But I trust you shall respond with truth to my questions. I *can* trust in that, can I not?"

Paulus nodded.

"I did not hear your answer to my first question!"

"Yes, yes!"

"I would know of this girl, this older one you have chained here. Why was she so chained?"

"She was found. Outside on the grounds."

"You know who she is?"

"Her name is Jenny. I don't know her last name."

"What do you know about her friend, Roy Ambers?"

"He—he lived here for a while."

"A member of your Family?"

"Yes. For a while."

Dracula smiled at Cam who in turn asked his own question.

"But Roy Ambers, did he ever take part in ceremonies like this one?"

The Count nodded. "You may answer his question."

"Yes, he was a member of the cult."

A sharp laugh from the Count. From Cam:

"In *this* type of ceremony—where someone was killed."

A pause. Then: "No."

"Did Roy Ambers, either here or elsewhere, kill anyone under your instructions?"

"N-no. He left the Family too early. He left when I wanted him to steal something. That's the first step, before any of them are told to kill. To be sure of them."

Now Cam smiled. Dracula frowned.

"Very well. There are some who think you had a hold on Roy Ambers after he left here. Is that so?"

"Yes, sort of."

"Explain, please."

"I told him that, if he ever said anything about this place, we would harm him."

"Harm him how?"

"With the Power."

"Was that all you threatened?"

"No. I said that I knew he had a girl—her. I said that she would know the Power, too, if . . ."

"All right. Speak of Derek Williams."

"He was a member. He no longer is."

"That was put very well. What happened to him?"

"Happened?"

"The torch you hold, Paulus, is it heavy?"

"But I don't know what you mean!"

"Why is he no longer with you?"

"He acted too scared. I thought he might crack and then tell about us. That's why I told him to leave."

"And why you killed him?"

"Kill? I didn't kill him."

"Excuse me. *Had* him killed."

"No. I didn't have anybody else kill him, either."

"The torch, Paulus . . ."

"*No!* It's the truth. *I swear it!*"

"You know that Derek Williams is dead."

"I, I know that the police think so."

"And you know the police are holding Roy Ambers on suspicion."

"Yes."

"But you neither killed him nor had him killed."

"Yes. No. I mean, I did not kill him, and did not have him killed."

The Count inhaled deeply. Cam could not miss the flash of triumph that permeated the vampire's features.

"One more thing, Paulus. You will admit to having killed others, will you not?"

"I have killed others, yes."

"How many?"

"I don't know. Really I don't. Altogether, in raids and ritual sacrifices, maybe fifty, or maybe a hundred and fifty. I'm not sure, I've never bothered to count them."

"I think that will be all, Paulus. I thank you for your cooperation. Now I think that concludes my business here, so I shall be taking my leave. But I do think, Paulus, that you should find some use for that torch of yours."

"No. Please!"

"Oh, it's not what you are thinking. No, indeed. You did fine. I am a man of my word, Paulus. When others live up to their end of a bargain, I always live up to mine. Always. And I expect the same from them. No, what I had in mind was another use of your torch. Fire is a great purifier. I want you to purify this building, and everyone in it. Your flock wears those wonderful and flammable red capes, I suggest you begin there. Don't be concerned, no one will attempt to stop you. They are, after all, in your Power . . . are they not?"

His eyes now narrowed as they rested on Cam's. "Ah, yes. I did say *everyone*, didn't I. While it may not have been intended, I am as I've said: a man of my word. So thus it must be. Besides, I made no bargain with Professor Harmon to protect your life, or that of his niece. A pity about her. I would so have enjoyed . . . Ah, but it simply will have to be my loss, yes?"

Dracula's laugh thundered through the barn as his shape was transformed into that of the great winged

bat. Already Paulus had set the robes of three of his congregation ablaze.

Furiously Cam applied his bodily strength to the chain which now had opened the flesh of his wrists from his agonizing struggles. The blood from those openings mingled with the sweat of his hands so as to make firm handholds impossible. There was nothing on which to wipe them dry, his entire body was drenched not only from his exertions but from the intense heat of the flames snapping around him. The sides of the room now were walls of fire, leaping upward from the bodies of worshippers who, as the Count had said, accepted the torch without objection and also had witnessed the consumption of their flesh without complaint. The High Priest himself had run from the barn with his torch but after an absence of minutes he returned.

"All the buildings burn!" he cried. Then he tripped among the blackened corpses. He did not rise from them. What did rise was the nostril-burning stench and the thickening billows of smoke, both of which served to dull the sharp edge of the Puerto Rican's mind.

So far, the flames themselves had not closed in upon the altar area, but unless Cam could free himself and the two girls, it would make no difference. The rafters could not be expected to hold for much longer, but even before that they would be dead from smoke inhalation, he in the midst of fighting for his life, the two others in their drug-trance from which there would be no awakening.

Of the two states, theirs was the more merciful way

to exit. It would be easy, perhaps, for him to accept his fate, easy to inhale deeply of the fetid air thickening around him, easy to force his mind into blankness, telling himself that this ending was predictable, this or some other horrible death at the hands of the fiend he and Harmon had released from his Transylvania crypt. They had meddled in things which it had been ordained that they should not, and Fate had decreed that they would pay the price, the full price. Harmon's price would be worse than his own. He would know of Jenny's death and how she died; the vampire would be sure of that.

Hell he would!

And now with all his concentration, Cam began to mentally intone the boyhood words of the Hail Mary as his finger, wrapped around and through the thick links of the chain, pulled for all he was worth. For all everything was worth.

But it was no use. No, it *had* to be! He had to.

Then he heard the cracking sound from above.

It was all over.

The thought crashed into his brain just as the great beam spanning the ceiling cracked loose from its hold and hurtled downward, crashing into the top of the altar and snapping into three termite-infested segments which harmlessly spun off in space in front of the three who were chained to the altar!

It, too, was cracked. Right along the path where the three metal staves had been driven.

With a fierce yank upward, Cam brought up the steel wedge that held his chains fast to the stone. Non-stop, his hands flew to his ankles and tore from

them the binding thongs. Next he gripped the altar-ends of the other two chains and with a muscle-straining snap upward they too were free. Now, if the rest of the ceiling just would hold until . . .

It did. Just in time for them to make the cool air of the outside, just a hair's-breadth margin of flight from the fiery door as he drew his two charges after him in the manner of a drover leading two mares who were too tired to move. Then the roof caved in with a shower of sparks that resembled a Chinese fireworks display.

The timing had been perfect, and Cam knew it could be no accident, as the timely falling beam had been no accident. He saw no one to whom to address his remarks, but he said them anyway.

"For what it's worth, thanks. Although I think your Master will take a different view of things."

"Perhaps," Ktara said from the dark shadows formed by a clump of small trees. "But that should be no concern of yours. Come, I have a car, as well as some clothes for you and your two mares."

Harmon was waiting for him when he entered.

"It would have been quite a surprise," the Professor said with a hard-edged tone. "I assume you know they are safe."

The Count gestured to the space behind his ear. "I could not but help to monitor your man's report to you by car radio." He smiled. "But as I told him, our agreement did not cover my allowing him or your niece to die. For me to kill them would not be appropriate, but then that is not how it would have been. I

did not chain them to the stone, nor did I set the structure ablaze.”

“Your semantics do not strike me as humorous.”

Dracula’s eyes flashed. “I am not interested in what you find humorous or what you do not find so. I am not interested in what you think about anything. I gave my word, and it has been kept. You, however, now must keep yours. You appear to have lost your bargain.”

Professor Harmon’s brows raised. “Oh?”

“The cultists did not kill Derek Williams.”

“That is correct. Which means someone else did. Someone other than Roy Ambers. *That* is our wager, Count Dracula: that someone other than the Ambers boy did the deed. Or have you forgotten the terms?”

The Count smiled grimly. “I have forgotten nothing, Harmon. The terms were that it be *proved* someone other than this Roy Ambers did the murder, if in fact there has been a murder. How do you intend to prove that?”

“Quite easily. We know where Roy Ambers was the night the police say he did away with Derek Williams. We know why he was there. I realized it when I heard Paulus Aliester’s answers to your questions. Back in Westhampton, when Ktara and I read the latent images of Roy’s medallion, I knew that he had gone there, not expecting any ceremony, but to conduct business with a single person. I am sure now that it was with Paulus, to have it out with him right there and then about the threat made regarding Jennifer. But when he saw what these people were capable of, he realized—even later, when he was accused of mur-

der—that he dared not say anything. Not just for his sake, but for Jennifer’s as well.”

“That is interesting, perhaps, but how does this prove innocence or guilt?”

Harmon smiled. “If Roy was at the commune, how could he have been anywhere else?”

Dracula’s smile widened. “What commune, Professor Harmon? When Roy Ambers tells his story, who corroborates it? Who is there to say that on the night in question there was indeed a ceremony? There are no witnesses not only to his presence there, but to anything that happened that evening. Even the buildings, all of them, are no longer there to bear witness. They have vanished, as it were, they have gone up in smoke!”

Harmon’s face paled as he realized the truth. But the Count was not content to let go.

“You could, I suppose, marshall some circumstantial evidence. Your man Sanchez could testify as to the cult’s existence and activities, but that would be just his word in league with Ambers. Then, too, your niece and that other poor girl might say things that could help. But it is my understanding that Ktara has conditioned their minds so that they will have no memory of the events. This is for their own mental protection, of course, but if you insist, I could compel her to change . . .”

“No. You know full well I wouldn’t want that!”

“I do. So it appears we are back where we have started, with one difference.”

Harmon recognized what that difference was. “Time.”

“One day, Professor. One and a half. That is all that is left to you. Do you really think you can win now?”

Harmon's eyes hardened. “I'll be *damned* if I won't!”

A low chuckle rose from the vampire's throat. “Yes, you will.”

CHAPTER 11

"I assume," Harmon said imperiously, "that you have been informed of my credentials and thus we won't have to take up any of our precious time, mine and yours, in preliminary sparring."

"I've been informed, Professor Harmon," the police captain said with a sigh. He had indeed, but that still did not prepare him for the way the old man in the wheelchair had crashed into the station house demanding immediate attention. The captain had just come on early morning duty when the first of three phone calls came through, each from a higher authority than the last, confirming what the last had said. He had not yet poured his second cup of coffee and the first had gone cold from neglect, when the old man and his big assistant thundered in. "Yes, sir, I've been informed plenty."

"Fine, then. Now I want to be informed of every aspect of this Derek Williams case."

The Captain pushed a manila folder across his desk toward the man in the wheelchair. "There's not much here, but it's all we've got. You're welcome to it. Frankly, Professor, we think we've got our man."

Harmon cut him off. "And *I* think you do *not* have

your man. That will be all for the present, Captain. My associate and I would prefer to be alone so that we can study the file."

The Captain's eyebrows rose. The message was clear. He was being booted out of his own office. The nerve!

But the three phone calls had been explicit. Give the old man what he wants. He poured that second cup of coffee and went out to the front desk.

He had time for three short sips when a thundering roar summoned him back to his office. He did not like the way the desk sergeant suppressed a grin. He also did not like the fire in the eyes of the old man.

He waved a single sheet of paper. It was a sloppily typed investigative report.

"Why, Captain, were we not informed of this before?"

"Sir, before this morning, I had no idea you existed. That might explain . . ."

"It does *not* explain why Mr. Sanchez here was not informed. He was here yesterday, as you recall."

"Yes sir, I have explained to my superiors that the instructions *we* received said only that we were to permit a visit."

"Never mind!" Harmon snapped. "It says here that on the night Derek Williams is presumed to have vanished he was involved in a curious game of theft."

The captain screwed up his face. "Theft? Here, let me see that." He read the paragraph indicated by Harmon's tapered forefinger. "Sir, the report says he was on a *scavenger hunt*."

"I read what the report says, Captain. I also read that the activity was conducted as part of an initiation into a fraternity. Notwithstanding the unevenness of your reporter, that fact suggests to me that what here is called a scavenger hunt because it is part of an initiation, might be something more than a run-of-the-mill game of collecting an assortment of unrelated articles. It suggests that there might be difficulty connected with the collecting. In short, it suggests that the collector might have to steal the items. Now, Captain, does that suggest anything further to you?"

The policeman appeared to be reaching the point of exasperation. "Professor Harmon, if the full extent of our problems with the college kids here were limited to little thefts of hotel towels, there would be rejoicing over half the state of California. What your conclusion suggests to me is that, for at least one night, at least one kid was involved in the kind of thing college students used to do way back, instead of shooting holes in his arm with some kind of needle or other. So I will defer to your superior judgment and ask what further conclusions *you* feel should be drawn from what is in this report?"

For a moment the captain's assault seemed to cow the professor, but just for a moment.

"A theft involves an *attempt* at theft. Does that sound logical to you?"

"It does."

"And an attempt can be successful or unsuccessful, is that not right? Never mind, that too is logical. Therefore, let us hypothesize that somewhere along

the line, in attempting to steal one of the items on his list, young Williams was unsuccessful and was caught in the act. Did that thought occur to you, Captain?"

"No, it didn't. Damn it, Professor, we've got our man! Why should we bother theorizing about what Williams might or might not have done?"

"Because, sir, if Williams was caught in the act of stealing something, the someone who caught him might have reacted, shall we say with violence. The someone might in fact have . . ."

"*Killed* the boy? Professor, nobody kills somebody just because he's taking something harmless."

"A harmless what? I see no list of objects in this file, no requirements which Derek Williams was to fulfill. Where is the list?"

The Captain looked through the file. "I guess we don't have it. It didn't seem to be of very much importance at the time."

The professor's eyes glowered. "It is of much importance at *this* time. I'd like that list within the half-hour. While I wait for it, I should also like to sample your station house coffee. Although, noting that you've hardly touched yours, I have the unsettling premonition that its quality might be very much akin to that of your investigative thoroughness.

Ten o'clock in the morning is a little early for a beer, Cam thought to himself, but he ordered the beer anyway. As the slim Chinese girl in her skin-tight cheomsang served it to him, the fat man who had been summoned from his sleeping quarters up-

stairs took the stool to Cam's right. His eyes gestured to the beer.

"I guess you're no cop."

"That's right, but I'm working on a case with them, if you'd like to check."

"I don't want to do nothing, sonny, except get back to bed and get some sleep. If it's okay by you, let's get down to what was so important that you couldn't wait till I come on shift later."

Cam slid a four-by-five photograph along the bar.

"Recognize him?"

The fat Chinese looked at the picture of Derek Williams. A smile began at the right corner of his mouth. Cam headed the next statement off at the pass.

"And please don't tell me that all Occidentals look alike, okay?"

The off-duty bartender completed his grin anyway. "You sure you're no cop?"

"I'm sure. How about it?"

"Don't know. Regardless of the joke, these college kids do look a lot alike." He pushed the photo back.

Cam toyed with one of the three triangular ashtrays on the bar. "Tell me. You lose many of these?"

"Yeah. Seems everybody wants a souvenir from some place or other. But they're cheap enough to replace."

"Who steals them?"

"Who doesn't?"

"Did you know that this place is a regular item, or at least your ashtrays are, with a Berkeley fraternity?"

As part of their initiation, they have to get one of these?"

The Chinese was unimpressed. "As long as they drink here, and maybe eat, too, who cares?"

He stopped in mid-sentence, a curious look coming over his face. Then he pulled the photo in front of him again.

"I think—yeah, this kid. Couple of weeks ago, maybe. Looked kind of scared. I remember asking him if he had a draft card because he looked scared. Licenses are easy to lose these days, you know? But he's of age and he has a couple of beers and then he asks me if I got food here. I tell him we got a whole dining room just out there, but he says no, he wants it at the bar. We only got fantails and egg rolls at the bar, I tell him. He says egg rolls and I go to order them up. When I get back the kid is gone. He's left two bucks on the bar, but he's gone."

"And an ashtray, one of those gone too?"

"I think maybe, yes. I remember thinking that the two bucks just covered the tab, including the hunk of glass."

"How about the night? Can you recall exactly when it was?"

The fat Chinese slid off the barstool and went around to the other side. Checking a marked-up wall calendar beside the cash register, he pointed to a particular date. "Right here. This night here."

It was the right one. Cam placed a bill on the bar and stood.

"You're sure about the date?"

The Chinese winced. "I'm sure, all right. The next day I couldn't work. Stomach pains, awful. See, when the kid took off, I ate the egg rolls. We got a pretty good cook, Mister, but don't ever touch his egg rolls. They can lay you up for a week."

So, Derek Williams had been successful in getting his ashtray. One could therefore assume he was successful in getting the things listed above it. Next, and last on the list was a funeral parlor candle; or, specifically, "a candle from a funeral parlor." Cam frowned. The list had been much more specific on three of the four items it contained. A particular book from a particular bookstore, a salt shaker from a specific hamburger place, and the Ho Wai ashtray. But now just "a candle from a funeral parlor." The obvious question was *which* funeral parlor.

Still at the bar of Ho Wai's, Cam sipped his beer and stared at the street map of San Francisco unfolded before him. To the right of the map was a copy of the Yellow Pages, opened to the funeral directors section. He had tried first "undertakers" and was curtly told that he would find what he wanted under *F*. Cam acknowledged the fact that the particular line of work did have its image problems and saluted the "directors" with a tip of his beer glass.

The rotund Chinese bartender had gone back to his bed, but he had been most helpful. He placed Derek Williams at the bar at about 9:15 or 9:30. According to police information, he had until eleven to gather all the required items and be at pick-up point, the East Cable Car terminal at California and Drumm. If

the bartender's time was remembered correctly, that would give the boy more than an hour and a half to get the candle and then get to the meeting point. If Williams was thinking logically, he would try to hit a funeral parlor between Chinatown and the terminal. If he wasn't thinking logically—Cam grimaced at the pages of funeral parlors on the yellow pages.

There was little choice. He would have to hope Derek William's college training gave him something in the way of reasoning ability. He scanned the addresses, checking off those which fell within the crude circle he'd pencilled onto the map. He was no more than halfway through his list when he found he had fifteen check marks. This wouldn't do at all.

He told the girl behind the bar that he'd be back directly. Once in the confines of the men's room, he activated his communicator.

"Yes, Cam."

"Professor, I'm going to need some help." He told him of his progress, then told him of the help he needed. "She can check out the ones north of Bush, I'll take the south ones. Sound all right to you?"

"It sounds all right to me. But Ktara may think differently. I'll advise." Harmon clicked off.

Back at the bar, Cam refolded his map and paid his tab. As he pushed his change back toward the girl bartender, he smiled cordially. "You expecting anybody to die around here in the next week or so?"

"Sir? No, I don't think so."

"Fine. In that case, you won't need these."

He winked at her as he stuffed the neatly torn yellow pages into his jacket pocket.

The boy had been scared, the bartender said. He has also said that the night was particularly rotten out. Very dark and very misty and very cold. Cam's logic told him that he therefore would have tried to stay to the main streets. Since he did not have a car, he would travel either by cab or by foot. If by cab, the exact route to his target would make no difference. But if the boy had been walking south, north was Ktara's problem (Harmon had called back saying she agreed), most probably he would move onto Montgomery. Cam did likewise, trying to envision the dark of night as he did so, not an easy task in the bright morning sunlight.

At the corner of Montgomery and Bush, he stopped. He now was at the northern border of his search area. He considered moving east along Bush, but discarded the idea. No, if the night really was as bad as the Chinese bartender had said, and if the boy had been on foot, most likely he would have continued south on Montgomery until he came to Market Street. Then he would turn east.

Cam checked his yellow pages. Yes. Any one of three funeral parlors would be on an almost direct line up Market toward the cable car terminal. Cam's logic might at this point be too logical compared to what a scared youth might think, but it was as good a place as any to begin.

At the corner of Montgomery and Market, he crossed the street and turned left. In five minutes he stopped before his first funeral parlor. He entered and, ten minutes later, exited. Under the desk of the

funeral director was now a small listening device which monitored a good half of the building. The routine was crude and hit-or-miss, but it was about all he could do unless something looked obviously wrong. Ktara's powers were much different, her methods of ferreting out secrets much more effective. But an ex-cop didn't have those advantages.

Yet there are advantages which an ex-cop does have, and two funeral parlors and two bugs later, Cam recognized this fact.

He also recognized something else. A face behind a fat cigar. A face from a mug book he'd seen in New York some three and a half years ago. A face on a man stepping out of a black limousine. He couldn't place the name, but the face . . .

He activated his communicator and passed his observations on to Harmon. "Of course, it could be innocent. Mobsters have relatives who die, too."

"That's true, Cam, and they tend to use the same establishments. It could be."

"That Derek Williams overheard something he shouldn't," Cam completed.

"Yes. You want a shot at the San Francisco book?"

"No. There's not enough time. The name will come sooner or later by itself. I'm going in. The name of the place is Yorge's. Yorge's Funeral Home."

Soft chapel music met Cam's ears as he closed the outer door behind him. The first door on the right looked like it might be the office, so he began to open it. He got his hand on the knob before an animal-like

grunt sounded from behind him. Turning he saw that from one of the other rooms had come a grotesque hunchback. His features resembled those of a wild African boar. His arms, thick as Cam's legs, hung so that the knuckles almost touched the carpet, or one of the arms hung that way. The other was actively engaged in a sweeping motion which signalled that he wanted Cam away from the door he was about to open.

Cam tried the friendly approach. "Good morning, my good man. I would have a word with Mr. Yorge." He then turned back to the knob. But only briefly.

The shuffling creature could shuffle with speed. Before Cam had the knob completely turned, he felt a heavy hand grasping the collar of his jacket. With minimum roughness the hunchback pulled the heavy Puerto Rican from the door. With a minimum of effort as well.

"*Nnnnaahhh*," the creature said, or something like that, as his great head pivoted left to right on its thick neck.

The message was quite clear. Cam tried the diplomatic approach.

"I appreciate your concern for the security of the establishment, sir, but I would have you know that Mr. Yorge would be very upset if he knew you have obstructed my seeing him. It is of the utmost urgency. Now, if you'll kindly release your hold on my jacket, I shall . . ."

"*Nnnnaaaahhhhh!*" The hold did not release. So much for diplomacy; the situation called for something more direct.

Directly, Cam's right heel thudded into the hunchback's stomach.

The hunchback ignored the blow. He didn't even rock with it. Instead, the hand that had Cam's collar swept diagonally downward to the floor bringing Cam along with it, as far as the side wall which got in the way.

So much for directness.

In any case, the door opened. The tall thin man who peered out began wringing his hands as if he were washing them.

"What is happening out here? Peter, explain yourself."

The hunchback, or Peter, explained with a series of gestures, the basic two of which were directed at Cam and the door. There also were some grunts and groans with an occasional *Nnnnaaahh*. Cam, again on his feet, added his explanation when the tall man had nodded his comprehension of Peter's.

"I was coming to see you. I assume you're Mr. Yorge?"

"I am. And I am frightfully sorry about what happened. I was in conference with a client and had asked Peter to see that I was not disturbed. I am afraid he sometimes is a bit too literal in his interpretation of my instructions. My apologies."

Cam accepted them, although he found it hard to accept that the grunting creature was *literal* in much of anything. "I guess I should extend my own apologies as well. I wasn't aware you had anyone with you at the moment."

Yorge's thin lips smiled. "I shall be just a few minutes more. Then I will be free to talk. Peter will escort you to a comfortable place to wait."

Peter did, except that the chair in the chapel room to which Cam was taken wasn't really comfortable. No matter, Cam used the time to study the hunchback who, tidying up the room in a make-work fashion, made it quite evident he had no intention of leaving the visitor to the funeral parlor alone.

Interesting, Cam decided. Why would anyone feel he would have to be guarded? What were they guarding against? If it was something important enough, it might be something worth killing for. Unless Yorge had been truthful and his pet orangutan, Peter, tended to carry out his orders with a little too much zeal. But Cam didn't think so. In the first place, Yorge had not told Peter to keep an eye on him, that much the hunchback apparently understood without any direction. In the second, it was a fact that the office Cam was trying to get into contained, not only Yorge but Franky.

Franky Scarf! Or Franky Scarvette to use his given name. Now Cam had the handle that went with the cigar-chewing mobster. And with the name came partial recollection of the man's history. The man was part of the Mexican drug chain that linked up territory south of the border with Houston and points northeast and northwest. Four years prior he had gotten into a mash with some of the New York City syndicate boys and had vanished from the scene. Cam recalled there had been speculation among police detec-

tives that he had been “taken out.” It turned out that he had, in a way, he’d been taken out to the West Coast. As to whether he still was in the same business, Cam didn’t need to speculate. When you are in as deep as Franky Scarf was, there’s only one way your association with the business is terminated.

Speaking of funerals . . .

“Nnnnaaahhh,” said the hunchback, pointing a gnarled forefinger at Cam and at the chair he was seated in. The message was clear: stay right where you are. When Cam nodded understanding and assent, the creature shuffled from the room. Cam heard the shuffling move down the hall and then heard nothing as a door closed. He pushed a button on the communicator in his pocket.

“This’ll have to be quick. I think this might be pay-dirt. The guy I mentioned earlier. Franky Scarf. He’ll be leaving here any minute. How close is Ktara?”

“Not close enough. But your idea is sound. I’ll move her down to your location. Find out what you can, then move on to your other places. I can’t afford to put all the eggs in one basket, no matter how sound the bottom seems.”

“Ten-four,” Cam said hastily. The shuffling was out in the hallway again. Sure enough, through the doorway came Peter who was in the midst of demonstrating that he was a handy fellow to have around. Over one shoulder and resting on the top of his hump was a very heavy casket. Cam knew something about lifting caskets from his Transylvania experience.

That casket had been but a simple wooden affair, albeit the bottom had been filled with dirt, but even then he had needed the telekinetic ability of Ktara to handle it. The casket perched on the hunchback's shoulder was not so simple an affair. It looked like it might be billed as the Cadillac of the death-box trade, polished mahogany and bright metal stripping everywhere. Thick and heavy. And nobody else's mental powers to help in the lifting.

Cam clicked his tongue in appreciation. A very handy fellow to have around indeed! Earlier he had seen how the man had taken a hearty *savate* kick in stride, and now this evidence of supernormal strength. If it came to a knock-down-drag-out . . .

Cam right silently hoped it wouldn't. For his own sake.

"Ah. Now, sir, what is it I can assist you with?"

Cam looked into the watery eyes of Yorge. The funeral director's hands wrung with pious concern.

"Td, I'd rather discuss this somewhere in private," Cam said. He flashed what he hoped was an anxious look at the hunchback. It was taken as intended.

"Peter? Ah, yes. He is a strong individual, isn't he? But really gentle as a lamb, I assure you, deep down in his heart. It is just that he doesn't realize that his strength is so, well, so abnormal."

Cam nodded. He could well imagine that if Peter took up a career as a door-to-door salesman his merely knocking would keep a nation of carpenters in business. "I'm sure he means well, but if we could step inside your office?"

"Of course. An office, I find, especially one with the usual office accoutrements—papers, books, that sort of thing—helps make this moment of sorrow take on the aspect of just being another part of everyday life. I've been thinking of writing a paper on the subject for our journal. We have one, you know. A professional journal for funeral directors. Anyway, I think an office, talking there, gives the, er, situation something of the business connotation, an impersonal touch which is, I think, needed in what is a very personal involvement. Would you agree?"

"I'm not a professional," Cam said, "but I think you have a point. I know I certainly would prefer talking things over in an office." But mainly because that's about the best place to park my bug, he thought to himself. "It is an interesting theory, though."

"I was sure I detected an intellectual in you, Mr.?"

"Yula," Cam said. "Cameron Yula."

Inside the office, Yorge got right down to the business at hand.

"Now, who is the loved one who no longer is with us?"

Cam had used the story in the previous places, and by now knew it by heart.

"It's my uncle, but he's very much still with us."

"Still . . . with us?"

Cam's smile was calculated to appear uncomfortable. "I know, it sounds a bit strange, but so is my uncle. He is very near death, Mr. Yorge, and has commissioned me to secure for him a place for afterward."

"I understand, Mr. Yula," Yorge said in his most understanding tone.

"Fine. I therefore wonder whether you have any brochure or advertisements that I might take with me to sort of give my uncle an idea of where, well, you know."

"I do know, Mr. Yula." He rose and went to a file cabinet to the rear of the desk. Cam noted that it took a key on Yorge's chain to open it. "I have some advertisements which show our chapel as well as the lawns."

"Fine," Cam said absently. The bug was now secured to the underside of the director's desk.

"Here they are. You know, Mr. Yula, it warms my heart to see someone such as your uncle taking an interest in these matters in advance. Most people don't think about death until it is far too late."

Cam rose and thanked Mr. Yorge for the advertising tearsheets. Behind his smile was another, broader smile which reflected his reaction to Yorge's last statement. He wondered whether Yorge was thinking about death, his own death and the arrangements to be made afterward. It might well be as imminent as the fictional Mr. Yula's fictional uncle's.

As the funeral director gave Cam's hand a last fishy handshake, the Puerto Rican directed his attention to something appearing in the ad.

"Oh yes," Yorge said. "Cadillac limousine with liveried chauffeur would be an essential part of any arrangement. I think you're quite right in nailing down these details beforehand."

Yes, but Cam's reason was to distract Yorge from

another detail, and he had been successful in doing exactly that.

The black cat, big as it was, slipped in quite unnoticed.

CHAPTER 12

"But did they *kill* him?" Harmon insisted.

Ktara looked about to lose her patience. "Professor Harmon, I have told you, I don't know."

"But the boy was there? You felt it, definitely, with no mistake?"

"I do not make mistakes. There were definite vibrations of the Williams boy, and they smelled of fear."

"That's consistent with what the Chinese bartender said. The kid was afraid."

Harmon nodded. "But the bartender didn't kill him, Cam. How do we know this Yorge or the hunchback did? Ktara, what did their minds say?"

"I didn't have all that much time, Professor. Not to do a thorough reading. As for the hunchback, there's little to read. He applies himself to the present task he is performing, that's all. His mind for the most part is fully occupied in directing his body. His associative powers of the mind are about the same as an intelligent jungle ape with some rote training. Yorge, as it turned out, had another customer call on him directly after I got inside. He is a mysterious man, I will say that, and an evil one, as you would define evil. There was a connection between the thought of

having a new body in the funeral home and his making a great deal of money.”

“Funerals don’t come cheap these days,” Cam commented.

“No, it was more than that. What I mean is, he was not thinking of the money being paid to him by the person he was talking to, the wife of the deceased. The money was coming from someone else, but it was connected to the conversation he was having. I do know that the woman could not be the source of the expected bonanza, she admitted that her financial state was very poor, and she was telling the truth. Yorge, in fact, agreed to make all of the arrangements and to take care of everything for a very small charge.”

Cam said to Harmon, “Completely out of character. I’ve seen greedy men, but this Yorge would steal the gold fillings from his dead charges’ teeth.”

“Correct,” Ktara confirmed.

“All right,” Harmon said. “We know that he is in someway mixed up with the syndicate. Did that come out at all in your readings?”

“No, not unless that’s the source of the money. Putting two and two together, even without any special powers, it would stand to reason.”

“But what about the *boy*?”

Ktara said thoughtfully, “There is this one room. . . .”

“Yes? Go on.”

“It appears to be a storeroom and workroom. I couldn’t get in there before I was discovered and evicted rudely. But impressions were left in one of

the chapels by Derek Williams. He wanted to go into the room. Something was there that he wanted."

"The candle?" Cam asked.

"I think so, but again I'm not sure."

There was silence in the room as Harmon weighed the decision that would determine his next course of action. He put off the decision to reassure himself on a point Ktara had made earlier.

"After you left the funeral home, you then walked the direct route to the cable car terminal."

"Yes."

"And you felt no trace of Derek Williams at any time?"

"Only at the corner, but as I said, that vibration, at least from its feeling, was created prior to his entering the funeral parlor. The neon sign in the night brought forth a feeling of satisfaction mixed with awe."

As Harmon again fell silent, the strain he was under was apparent to both Ktara and Cam. Finally, she decided to let him off the hook.

"You two are supposed to be trained investigators, but both of you have failed to ask me a very important question. You've concentrated on what I learned with my special mind-powers. You've not once, neither of you, asked me what I saw."

Cam held up a hand. "You *saw* something?"

A cat-smile on her red lips. "Something you should have seen, Mr. Sanchez. But then I suppose you were a little bit busy, planting your electronic listening device. Very sophisticated investigation technique, but the eyes—your eyes—could have given you the answer

you wanted, undeniable proof that your Derek Williams never left the funeral parlor alive.”

“Stop playing with us!” Harmon snapped. “For God’s sake, woman!” He stopped. “I’m sorry. I apologize.”

Cam stepped in. “And I missed something, presumably right before my eyes.”

Ktara laughed. “To place your bug, as you call it, beneath the desk you had to lean over for a moment. As you did so, your forehead was at most fifteen inches from what you should have seen.”

“And that was?”

“An ashtray. A white and red ceramic ashtray proclaiming the wonders of a particular Chinese restaurant.”

Cam’s eyes locked with the Professor’s. “Place the call,” Harmon said.

Leopold Yorge allowed himself a thin smile as he hung up his office telephone and sat back in his swivel chair. Excellent, excellent. Mr. Yula was having his uncle brought to the parlor around seven in the evening. The old gentleman had died. Yorge wondered whether he’d had a chance to read his advertising first, then dismissed the thought as totally irrelevant. The important thing was that the body was coming. That made for two in the establishment now. Services for one had been conducted this afternoon with burial slated for tomorrow morning. The late Mr. Yula could be—well, that after all depended upon his condition.

Excellent. Now he wouldn’t have to make the

choice he'd thought he was faced with. Everybody could be satisfied.

He again picked up the telephone and dialed a number.

"Mr. Scarf, please."

"Who wants him?" a gruff voice on the other end asked.

"Tell him it is Leopold Yorge. Tell him I have good news for him."

A grunt, then the sound of the phone being set down abruptly. Yorge sneered. He detested men like the one he could visualize who had answered his call. Animals, they were, all of them. No refinement, no culture. But then how could he expect the niceties of civilization from people who were steeped in essential vulgarity? Franky Scarf was no exception, even though he did try to be civil with Yorge. After all, Yorge was important to him. Yet the man's crude barbarities showed through all of the expensive clothing. It always was interesting to note the effect that seeing Peter had on Franky Scarf. The gangster's reaction of distaste was precisely the same feeling with which Yorge viewed Franky. Except that in the former case Yorge could sense an element of fear regarding Peter. He himself did not fear the likes of Franky Scarf. Not at least while he offered an essential service, and not while Peter was still with him.

"This is Scarf. Yorge?"

"Yes, Franky. I'm delighted to be able to inform you that you may bring your friend around sometime later this evening, if it's convenient to you."

"Friend?"

Yorge sighed. "Franky, the gentlemen we spoke of this afternoon. I told you I *might* be able to accommodate you shortly. Well, it now appears I can. Tonight, if you so choose."

"Oh. Okay, tonight, about nine. But, dammit, Yorge, why don't you talk plain English? You think maybe your phone's bugged or something?"

As they heard the click of the receiver, Harmon asked Cam, "Now, what do you suppose all that was about?"

"I figure we'll know fairly soon," Cam replied. "Hold it, he's dialing another number. I don't want to miss anything." Which was true, even though the tape recorder was picking up everything that came through for possible police use later.

"Hello." A female voice, sleepy.

"Is this Carlotta?"

"If you've got the number, you know who it is."

"Yes. My name is Leopold Yorge. I've been an admirer of yours for some time, my dear, and have been awaiting with eagerness the opportunity to call you for a meeting. As chance would have it, I find that tonight presents me with that opportunity."

"Gee, that's great." The voice did not match the words.

"I hope you are free tonight?"

"You know my rates?"

"Yes, my dear."

"I'm free. But, say, I don't know no Yorge. How is it you're an admirer of mine and I don't know you? I mean, I keep records of who I go with, you know?"

Just so I won't forget a name of a customer. Have I, er, been with you before?"

"No, my sweet, this will be a first for both of us. Let's just say that I've been an admirer *sub rosa*."

A pause. "Okay, let's say that, Mr. Yorge. When and where?"

He gave her the address and the time. The connection clicked off.

Cam shook his head. "It looks to be a busy night at Yorge's Funeral Home. I bring my *uncle* there at seven. At nine, Franky Scarf and friend arrive. And at ten, Yorge's got this little assignation set up."

"Assignation? That's a pretty big word for a non-college man."

"Jennifer! What in blazes are you doing here?"

"Uncle Damien, I want some things explained to me. I know you are trying to somehow protect me from something, and I want to know what. I figure that if you refuse to tell me, your friend Count Yula might. Among all of you, he seems at least to have some feeling. Where is he?"

Cam thought fleetingly of the coffin in the locked room to the rear of the house. Harmon quietly answered.

"The Count is indisposed for the time being. As for yourself, how did you get here?"

"My car. I . . ."

"*You* are getting right back into that car and heading back where you belong. No, Jennifer, do not take a chair. You don't have the time. I trust I've made my point. Cameron, please see my niece to the door."

Her face was red as she slipped behind the wheel.

The car was a beauty, a forest green Triumph sports job.

"Cam, can you tell me what *is* going on?"

"Your uncle is trying to help, Jenny. He's trying to prove Roy Ambers innocent."

"By sitting out here? By *your* sitting out here? How is that going to help Roy?"

"You really do care about him, don't you?"

The face that had been red from anger now flushed from some other emotion.

"He is a friend, Cam. A friend. Do you know what that means?"

"I do. Does Roy?"

"As a matter of fact, *Mr.* Sanchez, there are a number of incompatibilities between Roy Ambers and myself. Any kind of serious relationship between us would be unthinkable. For one thing, he happens to resent my wealth, all wealth as a matter of fact. Personally, I think his view is rather immature, but that doesn't stop me from liking him. You don't dislike someone just because they are immature, do you."

Cam winked. "*I* certainly don't."

The implication was obvious. Again she flushed. Cam had half-expected that his remark would directly precede the turn of the sports car's ignition key, which was the purpose of the remark, but it didn't. She definitely had something else on her mind.

"Cam, yesterday . . . I don't remember all of what happened."

"I know that, Jenny. They drugged you. We found you that way. I can't say much more about it because I don't know anything more about it."

That had been the story they had agreed upon, he and Ktara. They had been checking on the commune, found the building in flames, and located her and the other girl, who they had turned over to the police for disposition and a statement regarding her family's slaughter which she remembered so well it would take weeks under proper hospital care to free her from the more shattering effects.

"But still, I seem to recall certain things. You are one of the things I recall."

"Bringing you out of the trance, you mean."

"No. It was like in a dream, sort of. I didn't have any clothes on. I was standing in a strange place, and there was fire all around me."

"That's not so much a memory as it is a rationalization. You know that when you woke up you were wearing a robe instead of the clothes you remember having on when you were caught. All of the members of the commune wore those robes. They probably just changed your garb when you were out, that's all."

"That *isn't* all, Cam. I remember, as I said, being naked in this place with fire, and I remember you, pulling on some sort of chain which bound you. May I see your wrists, please?"

The jacket Cam wore effectively hid the bandages which had been applied after his return to the house the previous night.

"Don't be stupid," he said. He knew he had to get off the topic fast, but there was one facet of it which might solve his current problem.

"I suppose," he said, "that I was naked, too."

"Well, er, yes. As I remember it."

"As you remember it," he repeated. "Well, Jenny girl, as you remember it, how did I look? Am I as dashing undraped as I am fully tailored? Would you describe me as looking virile, or would you . . ."

But the sound of the ignition and the roar of the engine made continuing his interrogation futile. He waved his arm good-naturedly, but the girl never looked back through the dust cloud that exploded between them.

At seven P.M. sharp Cam rang the buzzer to the right of the front door. Yorge himself answered. Registering a sad and understanding smile, he nodded his head curtly. "And the deceased?"

"In the station wagon. He's already in his coffin."

Yorge peered around Cam's shoulder to the black station wagon across the street which was illuminated only by the red neon sign to the front of his establishment. "In his coffin?" he repeated.

"Er, yes. As I mentioned, Uncle is, was, somewhat eccentric. He picked out his own coffin years before. He always felt he'd driven a hard bargain. So few people negotiate a matter such as that prior to demise."

Yorge's mouth curled into a thoughtful frown. "I quite agree."

Cam said helpfully, "But don't be concerned. I understand your position. I'm quite willing to pay for the reconstruction work you normally do, even though it won't be necessary."

"*Won't* be necessary?"

"It's to be a closed coffin throughout," Cam explained.

"I see."

Cam's expression remained that of a grieving relative, but inwardly he was smiling. Yorge saw, all right. He saw his profits from this particular deal falling between his wringing fingers. Cam again tried to bolster the undertaker's feelings.

"Of course, for the purpose of the chapel service and all, I would be guided by your recommendations as to a proper casket. After all, Uncle was rather thrifty as well as being far-sighted. He felt all he needed was an old pine box. However, his survivors feel differently."

"I am happy to hear that, Mr. Yula."

I'll just bet you are, friend. "I, er, had some help getting the coffin into the station wagon."

"No problem, no problem. Peter will be able to handle it easily. *Peter!*"

The hunchback had been right to the side of Yorge, within three feet. Evidently, Yorge was a very careful man. Cam stood aside as the big creature stepped through the doorway and to the street, across it and to the station wagon. It was with a grunt of straining that he hoisted up the box he found there. So the mighty ape is not all that invincible, after all, Cam thought. Then he threw the thought away as the coffin was hoisted up and over Peter's shoulder. His shuffle back to the building was normal, although Cam tried to detect an additional staggering effect from the weight of the box.

As Peter passed through the doorway and down the hall, heading for its very end, Yorge cleared his throat.

"Perhaps we should talk of the location of the burial plot, Mr. Yula."

"Yes, we should. Unfortunately, I did not bring that information with me tonight. Suppose I call you in the morning? All the papers, well, I know I *should* have . . .

"I understand. Morning will be fine. Now as to the type of casket for the viewing, we might take a moment or two now to discuss it."

"No need, Mr. Yorge. I will leave that in your professional hands. Do remember, though, it is to be a closed casket affair. Opening the coffin would not be consistent with Uncle's wishes." *Also, you would find it a real mistake from your own point of view.*

"Well, then, what about the flowers?"

"Again, sir, your decision."

"The service? Of what religion was your late uncle?"

An interesting question. "He did not ascribe to any of the formal institutional religions. Therefore, there will be no service. Just an opportunity for family and friends to gather. I hope that will be all right."

Yorge's eyebrows raised. "My dear boy, *anything* is all right. Our job is merely to conform to the family's wishes, and the deceased's, too, of course."

"Excellent. There being nothing more, then, I guess I'll return to the others."

"Er, what time shall I see you in the morning, Mr. Yula?"

"Early," Cam said. *A lot earlier than you think, perhaps.*

Three-quarters of an hour later, the conversation which came over the small speaker in Cam's station wagon was especially interesting, even if slightly muffled and one-sided:

Yorge: "Peter, where are you taking all those crosses?"

Peter: Unintelligible.

Yorge: "To the outer workshop. But why?"

Peter: Again unintelligible.

Yorge: "All right, if you must polish them. But they look clean enough to me. Just be sure you're finished and ready by nine. We have company then, which means that we have work to do." Pause. "Really, Peter! *All* the crosses?"

Cam grinned. The hunchback who was as strong as an ox evidently had the mind of one. His mind was easily controlled by the creature who now lay within the workroom, a creature who, for reasons known only to himself and perhaps Ktara, could not abide in the presence of the cross. "The sign is much older than you might appreciate," Count Dracula had said once. Cam had asked the Professor about it and Harmon had said that the vampire was correct. "Even though we have no way of knowing what the *original* cross symbolized, it is nonetheless a weapon against him; one that we must keep in reserve at all times."

Cam had taken the warning to heart. And close to his heart at present he could feel the coolness of his silver crucifix. He hoped and prayed that as events moved this night he would not need such a defense.

Manny Lekk was an edgy man. He also was a very

fat man, a fact that sometimes made him edgy about dropping dead from heart attack. Tonight, however, it was not his weight that was causing his nervousness. It was Franky Scarf.

He had gotten a call from Franky late in the afternoon. "A meet," Franky had said. "Louis will pick you up at eight-thirty. Be ready."

And that's all, just that. And that's what made Manny Lekk edgy.

Why a meet? Why tonight? And what kind of meet? Just Franky and himself, or were there others going to be there?

Of course, Franky always was direct and to the point. It was just that . . .

Manny Lekk had a specific reason to wonder. Had Franky uncovered the fact that he had been skimming off some of the stuff for his own account? Impossible. Yet, maybe somebody had talked, like one of the street men Manny had sold to. But why would one of those guys do that? After all, Manny's prices were lower than the usual Scarf tags. On the other hand, the price Franky might be paying for information . . .

But, no. He'd only been doing this for a couple of weeks now. Franky did not have that big an organization to begin with. How would he be able to catch on so quick to what Manny was doing? He wasn't taking that much, really. Nobody could notice that small an amount was missing in the chain. So, if Franky did know, it had to be one of the street guys who tipped him off for a price. Could Franky actually have had the word out all along that any of his own who tried

to undercut his selling price should be reported—that a sizable reward would come into the hands of the informer? If so, then something else didn't make sense. Why it had taken the full two weeks for him to be reported? It didn't jibe and therefore Manny was worrying unnecessarily.

Unless the street man who reported him waited for a couple of profitable deliveries first, then blew the whistle.

Possibly.

Manny poured another martini. It was his third since the telephone call from Franky. He shook his head. What was he worried about? He had gotten calls like that before, hadn't he? A meet. Whenever Franky called one, it was always in a hurry, always on short notice. Always, when there was some kind of trouble. But had Franky always sounded so short? Manny tried to remember and couldn't. Probably he did. As for his sending Louis around to pick him up, that was nothing unusual. Franky held his meetings in a variety of places, and always sent one of his musclemen-drivers to pick up those who were to attend. So there was nothing unusual, nothing to be nervous about?

So why am I nervous?

Simple. Never before was there anything to be nervous about. Stupid. It was stupid to have tried to shave off a little bit for a separate account. Profitable in the short run, yes, but if the short run really turned out to be as short as it might . . .

Nobody crosses Franky Scarf. That was one of the ~~first~~ things he had been told about the boss who took

over this territory a couple of years ago. Nobody crosses him. Manny himself had never been involved in any of the "removals." That's what they were called by the others, removals, and they weren't decided at the meets. At least none had been decided at any he'd personally attended. But that didn't mean much. He wasn't in that end of the business. Removals came on direct orders from Franky and were carried out by guys like Louis. They were killers, each of them.

But they were drivers, too! And that's all that Louis had been told to do, Manny was sure of it. Pick up Manny, Louis, and drive him to the meet. Sure, that was all there was to it. Manny could almost hear Franky giving the instructions.

He could also almost hear Franky giving other instructions. So Manny has been dipping his fingers in the till? Hit him!

How in blazes could he *tell*? How could he *know* what was going to happen, or, rather, what Franky intended *should* happen?

Face the fact. There was no way of knowing, all right?

All right, what's next?

Prepare against the possibility, however remote. The gun.

The gun. It was a revolver, five-shot Smith & Wesson chief's special, deluxe nickel finish. Light-weight. Shiny new. Never been fired. *Never been fired!*

It will be, if the situation demands. Right? Besides, killers like Louis never expect people who don't normally carry guns to all of a sudden start packing

them. The unexpected could be the edge needed against him.

Manny nodded to himself and placed the sparkling weapon in the inner breast pocket of his suit jacket. He immediately withdrew it and checked to be sure it was loaded. It wasn't.

It took him ten minutes to remember where he had stored the bullets. When the gun was loaded and back in his pocket, he saw that he had twenty minutes left to the time when Louis was scheduled to arrive. He also saw that his martini glass was empty. He promptly headed for the bar where he built himself another.

It was three-quarters gone when the horn sounded outside. He peered through the window. In the driver's seat of the black limousine at the curb, a match flared and moved toward a cigar. The cigar was in the corner of a mouth that the light made recognizable. Manny rushed to the door, first checking that the pistol somehow had not disappeared from his person.

"It's cold," Louis said. "Don't you need an overcoat or something?"

Manny shook his head as he took the seat beside Louis. The death seat it was called, he remembered with a shiver. "No, not with all the insulation I got."

Louis laughed gruffly. Manny was comforted by the laugh. The man seemed in good spirits, not like a man who had gotten orders to make a hit. Not unless the particular man *enjoyed* killing. Manny wondered whether or not Louis liked his job.

"Where's the meet?" is what he asked.

"You won't believe it," Louis answered. "I bet you won't believe it."

"Try me."

"Naw, you'll see it when we get there. But I bet you won't believe it."

End of subject, evidently, but still in a friendly joking manner.

"Lousy night for a meeting," Manny tried. "Dark and foggy."

"They're all like that lately," Louis observed.

"Who's gonna be there tonight, everybody?"

Louis shook his head. "Franky didn't say. He just said I was to come over and pick you up. Hey, you want me to put the car heater up? Like, it must be real cold without no overcoat."

"No need. Like I said, I got enough insulation."

"Yeah, you did say that."

"Yeah."

Louis drove expertly, moving the car always just within the speed limit. The mark of a good wheelman, Manny knew. The police might have a mile-long record on Louis, but Manny was willing to bet there was no traffic violation on it of any kind, not even a ticket for overparking. The expert driver was careful about his use of the tool of his trade, but his expertise allowed him to wheel his vehicle from place to place in a shorter time than an amateur who rode over the speed limits when he could. Especially was this true when the trip involved passing through city streets. The trick was always to keep the needle exactly at the limit number and maneuver around other vehicles with a deft hand at the wheel. No panicking, always cool.

Manny supposed the same sort of expertise was in-

volved in Louis' other trade. No quick shot, just a cool professionally aimed pistol with an emotionless squeeze of the trigger. He swallowed hard.

"You know what the meeting's about?"

"Uh-uh. You know how Franky is. He just says what has to be said, that's all."

"Yeah. Franky also was a professional. "I suppose you don't know how long the meeting will take?"

"No. Why? You got something else planned?"

"Well, sort of, for later."

"That's too bad."

Manny gulped. What did he mean by *that*? Too bad that he had something planned for later. Why? Maybe he wasn't going to have any *later*. Maybe Louis knew it? But, no. Maybe what Louis meant was that the meeting might last long enough so that he might miss. . . .

"Well, the other thing I got is for real late tonight, so probably I won't miss it."

Louis nodded, his eyes trained on the two cars he was maneuvering between. "That's good then."

That was more reassuring, except why didn't Louis *look* at him? Was he afraid to?

Ridiculous! The man was just busy driving, doing his job. Besides, if his other job, if he *had* another job to do tonight, concerned Manny, he wouldn't be afraid to look at him. Louis wouldn't be afraid of anything like that. But at least Manny had his gun. Louis wouldn't expect him to be carrying one, he was sure of that. Manny had never carried one before, and there was no reason for him to be suspicious.

"Almost there," Louis said.

The car had been on Market Street for a couple of blocks now. Suddenly Louis took a left turn and before Manny knew it he had come to a full stop. The letters spelled out by the neon sign gripped his spine like ice-cold fingers.

"A *funeral* home?"

"Told you that you wouldn't believe it." Louis laughed and got out of the car, pulling the collar of his topcoat up. Without checking back to see if Manny was following, he crossed the street, stepped up to the door and rang the bell. Puffing from the exertion of running to get out of the cold, Manny arrived behind Louis as the door opened.

"I'm Louis. I work for Franky."

"Oh?" asked the tall thin man who had answered the door. "Franky mentioned something about bringing over a friend."

"Yeah." He pointed a thumb at Manny. "This is him. Manny Leck. Manny, this here's Mr. Yorge. He owns the place."

Yorge looked from Manny to Louis. "*This* is the friend? I thought . . ."

"You thought right. You gonna let us in out of the cold?"

Yorge stepped backwards inside. "I, I have some people in one of the chapels. We had best move direct-to to the back room. It is soundproof there."

Louis had let Manny step in front of him. "Hey, you ever hear of anything like this before? I told you that you wouldn't believe it."

"You're right about—"

Manny's speech choked to a halt. He had turned

around to speak to Louis. When he'd done so, his view took in the spectre which stood to the side of the front door. A huge misshapen being, an ape of a man! Leering at him!

Louis, following his glance, appeared just as startled. "Yorge, what is *that*!"

Yorge smiled benignly. "*That* is Peter. He assists me. He comes in very handy, I assure you. Now, gentlemen, please, right this way."

A door at the end of the corridor opened at Yorge's push of the knob. He went in first, followed by Louis, then Manny. Manny heard the door close behind him, but did not look back. His eyes were too taken by what was before him. There had been a small ante-room with shelves which they had quickly passed through. But beyond the filmy curtain which separated that room from the one he now entered . . .

He felt himself getting ready to gag. Everywhere in the room, lighted only by a goose-necked lamp, there were coffins. Some were open, others closed. He shook his head to clear it. Of course there would be coffins in the back room of such a place! But where were the others? Where was Franky and the others?

"Louis, the others. Where are they?"

Louis shrugged his shoulders. To Yorge he said, "You sure this room is soundproof?"

"Yes," came the response with a touch of exasperation. "But I don't understand. Franky said he was bringing a *friend*."

"Like I said, *he's* the friend."

"But—"

"Look, Yorge. You take a look at my friend Manny,

at Franky's friend Manny. He weighs in at close to three hundred pounds. Why should I strain my guts trying to carry something that can walk."

"C-carry? *Carry?*"

Louis smiled weakly at Manny. "Right, pal. See, this is the end of the line for you. Franky didn't like the way you were scraping off some of the profit for yourself, you know what I mean?"

It was all so businesslike! So calm! So sure of himself was Louis that he hadn't bothered to go for any kind of weapon.

Manny decided to take up the slack.

Louis looked at the nicked revolver with contempt. "Did you remember to load it, Manny?"

"I loaded it all right, and I'll use it, too. If I have to."

Yorge advanced a step. "Gentlemen, gentlemen! I'm sure we can settle all your differences in a civilized manner. Sir, is there need—any real need, I mean—for your somewhat dramatic method of brandishing your firearm. This is not a scene from a 1940's western movie, you know."

"You shut your mouth!" Manny ordered. "If you move one step closer you get it right between the eyes."

"Don't worry, Yorge," Louis said. "He ain't that good a shot. Manny, have you *ever* fired that shiny playtoy of yours?"

"You want to be first?"

"I don't think you have time, Manny my friend. You are about to leave the land of the living."

Louis' eyes were looking over Manny's left shoulder. A bluff of course.

Manny whirled. The hunchback! His arm was cocked back, and gripped tightly in the fist that now was arcing toward him at an undeterminable speed!

The heavy silver cross caught Manny square on the side of the skull. There was a blinding flash of red that screamed into his eyes. And then there was nothing at all.

Outside in the black station wagon, the dialogue came through loud and clear over Cam's receiver.

Yorge: "This is highly irregular."

Louis: "Like I said, I wasn't going to lift that clown and carry him here. Not when he could walk."

Yorge: "I made no deal with Franky Scarf to do his killing for him. I'm telling you here and now, this will come at an extra charge."

Louis: "You do what you think is best. Now, about the burying. When?"

Yorge: "Your friend will be interred with the gentleman now being mourned in our chapel. Tomorrow. You desire to know who?"

Louis: "Uh-uh. Franky just wants to know when. He doesn't care about the company his friends keep." A harsh laugh. "Hey, that's kind of a joke, right? *Company* he keeps and all?"

Yorge: "It hardly is a joking matter, I think."

Louis: "Maybe, but it's pretty profitable, right? With all the two-in-one boxes you've planted for Franky already, I guess you're doing pretty well. Right?"

Yorge did not answer, but Cam answered for him into his communicator.

"Right."

"So now we know," Harmon's voice came back.

"We also know where we probably can find young Williams' body. Sharing one of Yorge's customer's coffin."

"The question is, naturally, which."

"Ten-four, Professor. I want a face-photo of Louis when he comes out—to match the license plate number I've already got. Out."

With which Cam clicked off. While he prepared his Nikon for action, he was silently congratulating himself for being an observant fellow. He would not have been so self-congratulatory had he been aware that a half-block behind him there was parked a car he *would* have recognized. It was a forest green Triumph.

CHAPTER 13

"Quickly, Peter, it is almost ten. Wipe off that bloody implement you're holding and put it somewhere. Then place Mr. Scarf's friend in an empty box and close the lid. Close all the lids, as a matter of fact. I do not wish my guest to be unduly disturbed."

"Yaahhrr?"

"Yes, Peter, my guest. She will arrive shortly. You may arrange the special love box and the candelabra, if you will."

Harmon's voice cut in on Cam's transceiver: "What's going on now?"

"I'm sure we'll find out. Unless you think you should give my uncle the word."

"No, not yet. I want to learn all I can the easy way, then we can get what remains."

"Hold it. Another visitor. Female and a working girl. Going up to the bell, ringing it. Ah, that's the closest thing I've seen to it."

"To what?"

"To a genuine smile on our friend Yorge's face. He's positively beaming."

Yorge was feeling expansive inside as well as outside. Everything was working out so perfectly. The young girl looked ravishing, in a hardened way, of course. But that was the way he liked them. Each to

his own taste. Each to *her* own taste, too, and the girl didn't appear to like what she saw.

"Is something wrong, my dear?"

"Are you Mr. Yorge?"

"I am. I repeat, is something wrong? Does my appearance displease you somehow?"

She shrugged. "As long as you're paying my rates, nothing much displeases me. Except that I've got to say that this is the first time I've ever worked in an undertaker's parlor."

Yorge smiled patiently. "Please, my dear. We in the business prefer to be called funeral directors. It's much like in your profession."

"I don't much care what I'm called, Mister. As long as I'm called, and paid."

"You seem to have an obsession with money."

"I'm not in this for laughs, my friend."

Yorge chuckled nonetheless. He certainly liked what *he* saw. She was not a tall girl, but very well rounded. Obviously of Spanish extraction, probably Mexican. Dark eyes, dark hair which she wore long. Legs a bit too thick for the shimmery silver miniskirt she wore under her short coat, but one could hardly order up a meal for connoisseurs over the telephone, could one? Nonetheless she would do very well. The anticipation was welling up within him. It was going to be a really wonderful evening. How nice that Mr. Yula provided him with the opportunity!

"My apartments are at the end of this corridor, Carlotta. As we walk to them, please try not to attract too much attention from the people in the room to our left. They are grieving and probably won't be

looking out this way, but I suspect that your appearance might cause them to wonder."

"You, you got a *stiff* in there?"

Yorge resisted the temptation to gloat. "We have a family mourning the passage of a loved one from this life."

Carlotta shook her head. "I sure hope your apartment is a little more cheery."

"Let us go and see, my dear."

Cam spoke into his communicator. "I don't like this. I think it's time to . . ."

Harmon interrupted. "No, like the man said, let us go and see."

"I don't know, Professor. We're taking a big risk."

"What risk? The Count can be out of that coffin in an instant, if the need should arise."

The woman's scream sounded then.

Yorge's voice was soothing. "Why should you be alarmed, Carlotta?"

"Th—those are coffins!"

"Think of them as resting places. That's what they are, you know. They're all closed, all except that one. See?"

"But it's so dark in here. Just those candles. It's creepy, and why is that one casket open?"

A light-hearted laugh. "That one is to be *our* resting place, my dear. Now, if you will kindly disrobe."

"*Our* resting place. You mean you want *me* to . . . I mean, you want to . . . in *there*?"

"Why not? Really, it's the finest pure white velvet and satin you will find anywhere. Excellent cushioning beneath and to the sides. Frankly, I doubt that you've ever lain in a finer bed."

"But it's a casket!"

"True."

"Listen, you never said anything about wanting anything like this."

"Again, quite true. It must have slipped my mind. But, after all, I don't doubt for a moment that you've served other clients who also have had their little affectations."

"I don't consider this little, Mister. I don't think I want to consider this at all."

Now was the beginning of the pleasurable part. "I, on my part, don't think you can retreat so easily, Carlotta my girl. You did make a deal, did you not? Then, too, the door to the hallway locked behind you. I suggest that you take your clothes off and, since you seem to regard it so, get your ordeal over as soon as you can."

"What if I scream my lungs out? How will your fancy *mourners* take that?"

Yorge informed her as to the soundproof nature of the room. "Also, screaming would upset my associate who, although he normally is as tame as a kitten, gets somewhat wild when hearing screams, especially the high-pitched screams of a woman."

She followed his eyes to a large black shadow in the corner. The shadow rose and in the candle-light she saw the leering face of Peter.

She stifled the scream before it reached the back of her throat.

"Very, very wise," Yorge commended her. "The clothes, now."

"He, he's going to *watch*?"

"No. He will stay seated where he is, unless I call

him. Otherwise he will stay put, and with us down in the casket, what is there for him to see?" Yorge placed a comforting hand on the girl's shoulder. "I'll tell you what. I am fully aware that this is a bit bizarre, even for one of your occupation. Therefore, I shall reward you well. If I enjoy your performance, you shall receive a little extra something in addition to your fee. How will that be?"

The expression on the girl's face plus the darting of her eyes showed the mental processes she was undergoing. The door was locked. The room was sound-proof. There was that ogre in the dark corner. Finally, there was the extra something he was willing to pay. She sighed, then took off her coat.

"At least you haven't brought out any whips," she said. The coat was placed carefully over the end of a coffin. Dress followed. She wore nothing except her shoes, which she lightly stepped out of. "I guess I'm ready."

"And I shall be in a moment, my love. Please, get yourself settled in the resting place. Ah, there." He watched her as she lay upon her back, looking up at him.

"Aren't you, aren't you getting undressed?" she asked.

"Another quirk. No, I must stay fully attired. Well, almost fully attired. You shall see."

He began to climb in after her. In seconds he was adjusted to her body, his legs angled up from the end of the casket with his shoes hanging over the edge and his arms dangling from the top end, his hands brushing the floor. It was a large casket, but Yorge was a man.

"There now. I think we can begin, yes?"

Her eyes were closed, but she nodded. She obviously felt his effective presence below, for she thrust upward slightly to envelop him. For his part, anticipation had crossed over into excitement and he knew the time would be short now—yes, at any moment—but he must delay that moment. He concentrated on her face.

"You look too tense, my dear. Loosen up. I was told you were the kind of girl who could take anything. Your friend Anne . . ."

Her eyes opened. "Anne? Anne Belamonte? You know her?"

"We've done business together, here. Please do not stop your activity. Then we can continue talking, if you like."

Carlotta picked up where she had left off. "She . . . Anne . . . went out one night and no one has seen her since. When, when was it you saw her, Mr. Yorge?"

A little laugh. "On the night she died, Carlotta, the night she died."

And now it was that Yorge pulled his right hand off the floor and brought something with it. Carlotta did not see what it was until the business end of the thing was around her neck. It was a noose.

"Wonderful, wonderful," Yorge said. "It's better when you scream."

"Now!" Cam spat into the communicator.

"Check!" Harmon replied. "Count, you're on!"

Yorge continued to laugh. "You see, my dear, the fetish I have is even stranger than that you imagined.

I prefer my women in coffins, yes, but I prefer them dead. Newly dead, it's true, but *quite dead!*

On the intercom, Harmon's voice: "Count, quickly, he's going to kill her!"

Dracula's voice: "Who is killing whom, I have no idea."

Harmon: "Get out of that thing and see for yourself!"

Dracula: "I would like to oblige you, Professor Harmon. But there is something on the coffin lid that pins me to the earth on which I lie. From its emanations, I would say that it is a cross of some kind."

Harmon: "*Cam!*"

But Cam no longer was in the station wagon.

Was there time enough, though? There were two doors separating him from Dracula's casket. If he had to eat up precious seconds battering them in, if in fact he *could* batter them in?

But just as he reached the first, good fortune smiled upon him. The door opened. A group of three people, two women and a small man, stood in the doorway, an expression of reverential loss on their faces.

"Excuse me!" Cam snarled as he tore through them.

One of the women yelped in surprise, the other simply staggered backward. The man, who had been shoved to the wall, tried to recover some of his composure. "I say, sir!"

But Cam was beyond listening. Now at the second door, he tried the knob. Yorge had told the woman that it was locked, but there was no harm in trying. It was locked. Backing up three long strides, Cam let fly at the door the sole of his right boot connecting just

over the knob. There was a splintering crack as the door tore free from its hinges and crashed into the room beyond it. The big man's momentum carried himself into the room as well, as far as the wall shelves were his arched mid-section brought down a number of glass and metal objects. A ricocheting snapping reflex brought him through the flimsy curtain and into the larger room.

Had he been watching it on some motion picture screen, the scene would have been laughable. The candelabra, a romantic touch in a ghoulish setting. The undertaker, half out of the coffin, his hand dropping the thick rope it had held and frantically trying to restore the front of his clothing to some semblance of dignity. The nude girl, thankfully not dead, attempting with both hands to loosen the noose around her neck.

But there was nothing laughable about it. First there was the cross, large and silver, resting upon the top of the Count's coffin lid. Second, and more immediately important, because he was between Cam and the cross.

Peter.

Yorge's eyes fired with wrath. "Mr. Yula, you have stumbled into something you shouldn't have. It is most unfortunate. Peter, he is yours."

Instantly Cam's right hand darted into the front of his jacket. It came out filled with a large black .357 Smith & Wesson.

"Hold it where you are, Peter, or I blow a nice big hole in your head! And you'll be next, Yorge."

("No!" Harmon bellowed into his communicator.

Unfortunately, Cam's receiver lay on the seat of the station wagon outside.)

Yes, kill them, both of them. Now!

The thought slammed into Cam's mind, it seemed to permeate the room. His trigger finger tightened. He knew where the instructions were coming from, and why. He also knew that if it came down to a struggle of wills his would crumble. He was aware that he had but seconds left to him to defy the vampire.

With a mighty thrust of his left palm against his right wrist, he moved the big pistol off-target—just as the big gun fired. The recoil of the Magnum, combined with his awkward grip, tore the revolver from his hand. The pressure on his brain disappeared.

With a forward spring, Peter charged.

"No, miss!" the little man with the two women said to the girl who was rushing toward the front door. "Don't go in. Something crazy is going on in there!"

"Police business," the girl snapped back. "Go home. We'll handle it."

The trick, Cam decided, was to get the brute on the other side of himself and that cross. If only he could feint him out of position, much the way a matador counters the rush of his bull.

But a bull didn't have long swinging arms of concrete. At least that's what the forearm that caught Cam on the side of the head felt like on impact, an impact that sent him backward as far as the curtain. Impact number two sent him through the curtain,

over the splintered door and out three feet into the corridor, flat on his back.

"*Cam!*"

"Jenny, get the hell out of—"

"Too late, Mr. Yula," Yorge said.

Peter already was in the corridor, awaiting orders. But the man obviously in control was Yorge. His long tapered fingers were curled around a small chromed pistol.

"It probably is not as damaging as that cannon you displayed earlier, Mr. Yula, but I imagine its effectiveness would be quite satisfactory. Shall we all step into the back room? You were so anxious to see the place, sir, and this woman, I must question both of you as to the purpose of your nocturnal visit. I see that you both know each other, and that troubles me somewhat. Shall we? *Very* carefully, Mr. Yula. I will shoot the girl first, if you should make any untoward move."

Cam shot a furious glance at Jenny as he got to his feet. She on her part tried to explain:

"I waited at the farm. Then I followed. I wanted to know what . . ."

Yorge chuckled. "We all want to know *what*, young miss. And we shall, we shall. Please, I implore you to hurry. I am getting a bit impatient for knowledge."

And again they entered in the candle-lighted room. Yorge, Peter, Cam and, for the first time, Jenny. And another, who entered last and was not noticed by any of them.

"Oh, my God!" Jenny cried. Without thinking of possible consequences, she ran to the white-lined cof-

fin and to the girl within it. Jenny loosened the noose. "She's almost choked to death!"

Yorge smiled. "Something you too might well experience before our night together is concluded."

"Jenny?" Harmon said. "Was that Jenny's voice I heard?"

The Count chuckled with malice. "It seems, Professor, that we have almost a full cast of characters here. Pity that you could not make it yourself, to see the end when it comes."

"Count, if Jenny or Cam is harmed . . ."

"It is useless to threaten me, Professor. While that cross remains where it is, *I* am useless."

Yorge gestured with his shiny pistol. "All right, who shall begin in our sharing of information?"

"Is it to be full sharing, Yorge?" Cam asked. He was edging closer to the Count's casket, but the hunchback had again taken up a position between the Puerto Rican and his goal. "Are you planning on telling us what we want to know?"

"Ah, *A quid pro quo*, is that what you seek? I do not know why I should, but then I do not know why I shouldn't, either. I, Mr. Yula, am in the business of death. You might say that I am a master artist in the field. In fact, I have heard of no one who is my superior." He paused. "I am speaking not just of what you see around you, not just my surface role of funeral director. But, you see, sometimes the living are not wanted living. Sometimes it happens that one person prefers another dead. This preference, if acted upon, could get one in trouble with regard to the laws of man. This trouble mainly stems from the problem of what to do with the remains of a killing, the *corpus*

delicti. And that is where I come in. It is my normal business to dispose of unwanted bodies. Therefore it is only a logical extension."

"To create the corpses yourself," Cam completed.

"Oh, no, Mr. Yula. Oh, sometimes I admit that I am forced to. Well, take your own cases, for example. Meddlers must be disposed of, and I do avail myself of my usual means. But for the most part, life has already left those I bury along with, let us say, the more legitimate occupants of coffin and the grave. Now, then, may we turn to the reason of your personal interest in these matters. Are you from the authorities?"

"Wait!" Jenny said. "He has not told us about Derek Williams."

"Who?" Yorge asked. "Who haven't I told you of?"

"Derek Williams. You killed him."

Yorge smiled. "Ah. The name, while it means nothing to me, strikes a bell with me nonetheless. A happy sound, I must say. It tells me that your interest is more personal than official. Yes, and that is excellent. My dear, I may well have killed your Derek Williams, or more likely simply buried him. I do not get that personally involved with individuals I serve in my humble way."

He executed a mock bow in Jenny's direction. "Well, then, it seems that I have no further questions. And those which you have it seems I cannot answer. Therefore . . ."

The hammer of the pistol cocked back.

Now or never, Cam decided. He dove. As he did so, something else streaked across the room headed in the same direction. Something that hissed like a snake, but was not. Something sprang like a tiger upward at

the pistol, but was not. But the analogy was closer this time.

The something was a huge black cat.

Seeing the weapon skittering across the floor, Cam stopped in mid-motion and whirled back toward the Count's casket. "Run!" he yelled to Jenny and the other girl. "Both of you, while you have the—"

Chance was the word he had in mind, but the side head first with the far wall, he heard two messages from two different sources.

Yorge was one: "Stop those women, you fool. I'll take care of this one!"

Ktara was the other, but her message was not vocal: *I'll protect them. Your job is that cross!*

Cam was up in a shot, but too quickly. Instantly he felt the hunchback's hands grip his jacket front. Helplessly, all he could do was try to break his fall among the coffins in the center of the room. He was only partially successful. Orange and yellow spirals began twirling behind his eyes as he tried to rise to his knees. Something was holding him down, restraining him. Focusing his eyes, he turned to see the gaping mouth of an aged man's corpse halfway out of his overturned resting place. The colored spirals grew more brilliant, then turned to a gray black.

How long he had been out he had no idea, but it could not have been long. Between the thunder of the blood between his temples, he could hear a frenzied voice:

"Peter! Peter!"

His vision clearing, he struggled to lift himself up onto his elbows. Now he could see the tall thin undertaker, frantically searching the floor for something.

The gun; the guns! There were two of them in the room, Yorge's little one and Cam's larger weapon. If he found either of them, Cam was a dead man.

He had no intention of becoming a dead man, not if he could help it. The problem was, it was all he could do to get into a kneeling position. In trying, he must have been noisy. Yorge's attention suddenly was on him.

"Peter!" he screamed. PETER!"

At least Jenny and the other girl had escaped. As for himself, if he couldn't get free from the weight which was crushing him . . .

"All right, Mr. Yula. It appears I shall have to deal with you myself. And in another, less pleasant way."

Cam saw Yorge's eyes casting about the room for something he could use as a weapon.

He almost coughed up his own blood in the sardonic laugh that choked its way upward.

Yorge's eyes had found something that pleased them, something suitable.

A big heavy silver cross that lay on top of a coffin.

CHAPTER 14

Like a sledgehammer, the cross loomed high above Yorge's head supported by his skeletal arms. He stood now inches from Cam, his face looking downward at his intended victim, a face that was twisted with hate.

"Just so you will know, my friend, if your two women are not now already dead, I shall complete my earlier rites which you interrupted—with both of them. It shall be a celebration. I want you to frame that picture in your mind, I want it to be the last thing you think of."

It was then that across the room, a coffin lid crashed open.

About time, Cam thought weakly.

Yorge's head snapped to the sound. A pair of hands were gripping the coffin side. Yorge froze at the sight of them. But the hands froze too. They moved no further!

The cross, you fool! He holds it so that I cannot rise!

Something, Cam thought. Must do something! It took all the strength he could muster, but something he did. His flattened hand, fingers together and forming a Y with his thumb, shot out, catching Yorge just above the shin. It was not a hard blow, but Yorge was not a sturdy man. His balance altered just enough so

that his body no longer could support the burden over his head. Under the strain, the arms came down. So did the cross, thwacking off the side of an overturned coffin next to Cam. *One thing more*, Cam's brain told him. *Now!* And again it took all he had, but the movement was successful. His roll to his side left the heavy cross beneath his body.

Yorge bent down to retrieve his weapon. As he did so, something glinting in the candlelight caught his eye. Something inches from Cam's side. Cam could see it too, but there was no way he could reach it. Awkward as Yorge was, he was much too fast.

The hammer of the nickel-finished revolver already was cocked. Yorge was bringing its barrel in line with Cam's head, when the low voice from behind him spoke.

"I would not fire that weapon, undertaker."

Yorge whirled. "Who—who?"

But he could say no more. He could just look at the large man standing in front of the open coffin. Large, formally dressed, untroubled eyes set deep over an aquiline nose and lips curled into an expression of mild amusement. He found his voice.

"You're not dead!"

"That much is obvious, undertaker. My associate lied to you, it seems. Allow me to apologize for him, since he appears to be in no condition to do so for himself."

"You won't be, either, when I—"

"When you kill me? Yes, I heard your little speech earlier about your role as master of death. A rather humorous claim. But then I suppose each of us must have our little fantasies, is that not so? But, first, it

pleases me to disabuse you of another of your fantasies." He turned his gaze toward the anteroom. "*Enter.*"

Peter did. He shuffled a couple of steps into the room, his eyes fixed on those of the man in black. He stood stock still.

"You see, undertaker, that your pet has returned. He previously was in the control of *my* pet, a much smaller creature but one with power far exceeding that of your great machine of destruction. At the moment, he is under my control, but it pleases me to return him to yours. You may give him any command you desire. He will obey."

Yorge sneered. "Of course he will! So now let me tell you what it is that pleases *me*. Peter, crush this insolent fool!"

Now it was that Peter's good eye dropped its cloudy glaze. The statuelike state of the hunchback was gone, the hands which had been at his sides dropping as his head lowered. He looked at the relaxed stranger, then at his master. His expression showed indecision.

"I said for you to crush him!" Yorge cried.

The message registered. With a low growl, the hunchback advanced, but warily, as if he suspected that this victim was somehow different from others he had been commanded to destroy, as if his animal brain could detect the complete absence of fear on the part of the one who, not only did not back off, but who turned to meet his advance head-on.

"*Kill him!*" Yorge screamed.

In response, Peter lunged. His thick lips curled into a semi-smile of satisfaction as he saw his victim take a sidestep toward the open casket. Others had

tried to avoid his rushes like that, thinking he could not move swiftly enough to veer.

Then a wave of surprise shook his nervous system as, at his contact with the other, some how the other's foot had risen sole-forward and, giving in at the knee-joint under the pressure of his own advancing chest, suddenly thrust, the leg muscles of the other snapping back like steel. And the hunchback went down among the coffins with a flailing series of crashes.

"Aaaarrrrrhhhhhaaaaaahhh!" It was a cry of pure rage with which the creature launched himself into his second attack. Again the other simply waited. This time Peter watched those feet, to be sure that what happened before would not happen again. But this time it was the other's hands which, gripping his upper left arm with the pressure of a vise, drove him head-long into the stone wall of the room.

Blood was now gushing from an opening caused by the tearing stone. And now it dawned upon the hunchback that for the first time he had met his match in physical strength. It did not dawn upon him that the other's strength might be superior to his, just equal. Therefore, even with his limited power of reasoning, he knew that he must add to his attack some kind of weapon. Wiping the blood from his eyes, he found what he sought in the form of a thick casket cover which, with one up-yanking motion, he tore from its bottom. Warily now, like a jungle stalker, he moved in for the kill.

"I begin to tire of my demonstration," Count Dracula said. "We shall therefore conclude this aspect of our business."

With a resounding roar, Peter brought around the

heavy casket lid as if it were the flattened wing of a turning aircraft. The turn, however, stopped in mid-flight, the halt caused by the two raised hands which stopped the lid-edge inches from the target's face, the force of the resistance so great that, by itself, it tore loose the shoulder muscles of the hunchback. Wrenching the cover from Peter's hands, the Count hurled it away, shattering it against the wall in a rain of many-sized splinters and loose bands of metal. Reaching forward, one of his hands grasped the hunchback's hair and the other grasped his coat just under the hump on his back. Then, as if the ape-man weighed nothing more than an infant, he held him, arms and legs dangling, high over his head.

His eyes flashing fire, Dracula leered at Yorge. "He shall need a resting place," he said menacingly. "Such a loyal servant deserves the best!"

With which the Count took three long strides to what had been the love casket and brought down his burden heavily, angled so that only the top half of the hunchback entered the plush white softness. There were two mighty snapping sounds where back met casket-side. One was the brass band around the edge of the box. The other, louder still, was the gnarled backbone of the creature. Peter himself made no sound. Nor would he ever do so again.

Yorge stood as if stunned. It was then that he remembered the revolver in his hand.

Dracula sneered. "I do not enjoy being shot at, undertaker, for such wounds are bothersome. But if it pleases you, you may fire at will."

It pleased the undertaker. He fired two shots in succession, point-blank into the chest of this man of

immortal strength. The gun fell harmlessly to the floor. Yorge could not believe his own eyes. He could *see* where the bullets entered. There were bloodied holes in the man's white shirt!

"And you call yourself the master of death! Dracula laughed. "Let me show you what a real master of death looks like!"

"No," Cam said weakly, trying to raise himself. "Not yet!"

But it had begun, that singular transformation of Count Dracula from man to non-man. The process took less than five seconds, but to the staring Yorge it seemed an eternity. Eternal also seemed the effort it took him to utter a single syllable: "N-no . . ."

"But yes, undertaker. You have had your spate of killing. Now it becomes the turn of another. Would you like me to tell you beforehand how you are to die? You so enjoyed communicating that sort of information to that defenseless girl earlier tonight, did you not? Listen, now, and I shall inform you."

"Master," said a new voice from the entrance to the room, "the time now is for questioning, not for informing. Before this man dies he must tell us things."

The Count's red lips curled over his great teeth. "But you already know the answers from his mind, is that not so, my pet? Certainly his guilt in the matter so important to Harmon has been proven to your satisfaction."

Ktara's eyes flashed yellow green. "To my satisfaction, yes, but he must tell us these things himself, so that his evidence will satisfy others. The terms of your agreement with Professor Harmon . . ."

"Professor Harmon be damned! It is my interpreta-

tion of those terms which matter. As for you, my sweet, do not attempt to keep me from satisfying my blood-need to drink from this low being's veins."

"*Count!*" roared Harmon's voice in the transceiver behind the vampire's ear. "Yorge *must* be questioned first!"

"*I defy you, Harmon!*"

With which the vampire sprang. Yorge screamed in terror as the powerful hands of the Count closed around his upper arms, then screamed again as those sharp teeth began to descend.

Suddenly they jerked away from him! And the grip on his shoulders loosened, as with a roar of pain the vampire clutched his own breast and, taking two staggering steps backward, slumped to the floor among the coffins.

Yorge could not stop himself from shaking, but as he started to move from the spot to which he had been rooted his eyes met those of the woman in the doorway. A strange woman, one he'd not seen before. A beautiful woman, dressed totally in black, but her present fascination for Yorge was not in her beauty nor her dress. Her eyes were pale green with white-hot centers.

They seemed to beam into his own brain, to calm it. His trembling ceased.

"Mr. Yorge, you must tell me of Derek Williams. The name is one, as you have said, you do not recognize. But some weeks ago he was here, a college student. You had him killed here, in this very room."

Yorge, feeling strangely at ease now, nodded with the smile of remembrance.

"A college boy, a couple of weeks ago. Yes, of

course I remember him. Did you think I would forget?"

"Not a professional like yourself, Mr. Yorge."

"Certainly not. He was here, here in this room, this very room. Snooping around, he was. He had some story about wanting one of my candles, but he saw this room, and a girl's body. I could not let him go. You understand that, don't you?"

Ktara smiled. "Fully. How did the boy die?"

"I had Peter do it. Look at him there. You would not believe how strong he was, how he could snap the neck of a bull if he wanted to."

"What happened to the body, after he was killed, Mr. Yorge?"

"The body?" Another laugh. "What happened to his body is what happens to all my bodies. It was buried, of course. Yes, dead and buried. That is my professional code. Yes."

"In whose coffin? With whom did you bury the boy?"

"Well, let me think about it. There were two bodies I had to rid myself of that day. Yes. The boy's and the young lady's, the one he saw. An Anne something or other. Now, one of them, I recall, went to rest with a Mr. Tracey. Yes. The other, let me see. Ah, yes, we had the funeral of a Mrs. Foxworth the following day. I recall it perfectly now. The young lady went with Mr. Tracey, the boy with the old lady. I thought that arrangement would be more humorous, or at least ironic. I believe in irony, don't you?"

Ktara's voice itself was like iron. "In some cases. You have called yourself a master of death, Mr. Yorge. Do you believe that?"

He began a movement which appeared to be an expansive gesture directing her attention to his workroom. He could not execute the movement, which caused him temporary discomfort, but he quickly regained his good humor.

"You have seen what I have done here. You *know*. Surely, I am a master of death."

"And surely," Ktara added. "Such a one would be so familiar with death that he would not fear its coming. Is that not so?"

"A true professional—yes, that's so."

Ktara had in the meantime crossed to where Cam lay pinned. Her eyes flashed strangely as she looked down upon him. "Mr. Sanchez, you and I must leave now, with the others. If you can, you should handle the Count's coffin, please."

Cam's head suddenly cleared, the pain receding from all parts of his body. As he stood, he tested himself for broken bones. He could find none. As he moved toward the coffin, he looked down toward the fallen vampire.

"We take him too?"

Ktara shook her head. "He shall find his way back on his own."

Cam now turned his eyes to Yorge who smiled upon him benignly, wringing his hands with satisfaction. "What about him?"

"He stays. As my Master has said, I cannot attempt to keep from him that which he wishes. Now, let us hurry."

Cam hurried. With Ktara's mental assistance he jockeyed the coffin outside and into the back of the

station wagon. Then they helped Jenny to her car. As for the other girl . . .

"We can drive you," Cam suggested.

Carlotta looked at him suspiciously. "Drive me to where?"

"The police station. I thought you'd want to make a statement."

"Do I have to? I mean, do you need to have a statement from me?"

Cam considered. She was, after all, a working girl. Explaining to the police just why she happened to be at Yorge's might prove embarrassing.

"No, I don't think so. We've got quite enough on him."

"He killed a friend of mine," she said. "Anne Belamonte was her name. He told me he did. She was a good friend of mine. Maybe I *should* . . ."

Cam shook his head. "No, there's no need. The police will be able to find her body without your saying anything. You can go home; but the offer of the ride still holds."

She looked into the rear of the station wagon and shuddered. "No thanks. I think the walk will do me good."

As Cam watched the call girl walk off into the night, Ktara's voice spoke from behind him:

"I thought you were a man of justice, Mr. Sanchez. According to the law, the woman is a criminal."

He smiled thinly. "According to Sanchez's Law, there are criminals and there are criminals." He changed subjects fast. "Can Jenny drive?"

"I'll drive her car. You will communicate to the Professor?"

Cam nodded and got behind the wheel of the wagon. It was not until both vehicles were speeding northward on Route 101 that he spoke into his transmitter. First he brought Harmon completely up-to-date. Then he asked a question of his own:

"You got everything on tape, loud and clear?"

"It's checked, Cam. Perfect reception. The tapes will need some work, however. But with them and your being able to tie Franky Scarf and his henchman in on at least one killing, we'll have quite enough."

"They'll have to open at least two graves in the morning," Cam said. "And I think if they break into those filing cabinets in Yorge's office they'll find the locations of a few additional coffins with double tenants. Yorge kept them locked, and he struck me as being the kind of character who would keep meticulous records of his antics."

"Cam you speak of Yorge in the past tense. Is he?"

"Not yet. We've left the Count with him."

A pause. "You . . . think that's best?"

"Professor, I can think of no better end for our murdering funeral director. Besides it was Ktara's idea. I think that if we'd done otherwise there would be hell to pay for her."

"As you say. I'll release the sliver now."

"Do one other thing first. Turn on the tape recorders."

"You want it recorded? Why?"

Cam explained why.

Yorge suppressed a giggle when he saw the face of the vampire slowly rise. "I know," he said lightly.

The Count's eyes flashed fire. "Do you? What is it that you know, undertaker?"

"The woman told me. The one with the cat's eyes. She told me. Not me exactly. She said it to the other, Mr. Yula. You're going to kill me."

"And knowing that does not disturb you?"

A little laugh. "No, not in the least. You see, I am a master of death, a professional. Such a one as myself should not be afraid to experience, to taste of death firsthand. The woman said that. The one with the cat's eyes."

"She told you that, did she. How very nice of her. But she is wrong, isn't she, undertaker?"

Yorge had begun to titter, but paused. His eyebrows now raised in uncertainty. "W-wrong?"

Count Dracula stepped closer. "Of course. You see that now, don't you. Death is the end, the final defeat, the extinguishment of your very self. How can one anticipate that with anything other than fear. You are beginning to feel something like fear, aren't you?"

"Yes, a l-little."

Nearer now came the vampire's eyes, his daggerlike teeth.

"Not only a little, that is not good enough. The fear you feel should reach the level of stark terror, for yours is not to be an ordinary death. The very blood of your essence is to be withdrawn from you. You will feel that happening, undertaker. You will experience every ounce of it draining from your life-system. Is that not horrible to contemplate?"

"Y-yes. Oh, yes. It is horrible." The trembling began again now.

"And do you not begin to feel the chill of terror spreading throughout your mind and body?"

"Yes! Oh, lord yes!"

“Do you not wish to ask for mercy? To plead for your life, so that you shall not feel these teeth of mine slash your wretched throat?”

“Y-yes, please, I beg you, don’t . . . don’t!”

“You who call yourself the master of death, die now!”

“N-no . . . *Nnnooo* . . . NNNNNNNNNNAAAAAHHHHHHH! NNNAAAA—”

Shuddering now like an epileptic, Yorge wanted to scream ever louder his pleas for mercy, but he could no longer make a sound. His vocal cords had been severed.

Nonetheless, in the moments he had left to him he continued to scream. Silently.

CHAPTER 15

It was nine o'clock the next evening. There were six seated around the dinner table at the Napa Valley residence that had been their operations headquarters, which tomorrow they would vacate. There had been eating, there had been a quantity of good cheer. A large quantity of both kinds was demonstrated by Professor Harmon. Now from the head of the table he lifted his glass of wine in a mock-salute.

"To the coming six months."

His salute and his remark was directed toward the noble-looking gentleman at the far end of the table, one who had not seemed to join in with the spirit of things. He had merely toyed with the food placed before him, and his wine glass barely had touched his lips.

"Six months?" Jenny Harmon asked. "What makes them so special?"

Harmon smiled. "The Count knows, Jennifer."

Count Dracula nodded. "I know it well, Professor. You see, Jenny, your uncle and I had ourselves a small wager. It seems that I have lost."

Jenny laughed. "I hope the loss to you is bearable, Count Yula. After what you, all of you, have done for me."

Roy Ambers interrupted. "For you? Where would

I be if you hadn't stepped in on my behalf? Without those tapes . . ."

"Ah yes, the tapes," the Count said. "A very clever strategem. Along with the bodies, they provide proof positive."

Jenny frowned slightly. "Yes, except that . . . Well, I know I was frightened and maybe wasn't thinking too straight at the time, but I recall the experience differently. I remember asking that fiend Yorge about Derek Williams, but I recall his answer having been different from what was on the tapes. In my memory he just said he didn't care about names, then he was going to kill us!"

Cam exchanged a glance with Harmon. Careful editing and retaping had placed the essential elements where they followed logically, and also had eliminated other elements which might have proved embarrassing.

"Anyway," Jenny went on, "I thank the stars that I kept the cat with me for company. It must have jumped into my car before I left the farm. I found it while I was spying on you, Cam. I considered leaving it behind, but somehow, well, somehow I *couldn't*. And it was good I couldn't. Roy, you should have seen the way that big tom—"

"Tom?" Harmon asked. "Jennifer, don't they teach any zoology at that school of yours. The cat you are referring to is a lady, a beautiful lady."

The Count nodded. "And like all ladies, she is unpredictable."

Ktara responded. "Possibly it is her animal nature which makes her so."

"Speaking of animal natures," Jenny said, "I feel it

was poetic justice the way that horrible hunchback turned on his own master."

Harmon looked at Cam with approval. It had been Cam's idea to intersplice Yorge's screaming for Peter with the undertaker's death-fetish. "Anyway," the Professor said, "it's over. I would propose one final toast, to Roy Ambers."

The glasses were lifted, but Roy took exception to Harmon's words.

"That can't be the last toast, Professor Harmon. The last should be mine. I make it to Jenny, a very good friend in time of need."

He was about to say more, but the object of his toast interrupted. She was looking straight at Cam, who had winked suggestively at her at the word *friend*.

"Excuse me, Roy, but there are some people around here who are so super-sophisticated that they refuse to believe in relations of friendship being possible in these *modern* days. Would you tell the group ~~what~~ you told me earlier, about what you've been ~~thinking~~ about your future?"

"Sure, it's no secret. I guess spending some time in a jail got me to thinking. I sure had enough time with nothing else to do. I made up my mind that if I got out, well, I'd like to do something with my life. I'm switching majors next semester and I'm planning to study medicine."

Jenny pushed. "Which means what, in terms of marriage, I mean."

"Marriage? Well, I wasn't thinking much about that anyway, but my decision on a medical career sure

knocks that out of the picture for a long time to come. I hope she'll wait."

Harmon's eyes connected with Cam's. "Oh? You have a particular young lady in mind?"

"Yes sir. In my hometown, in Seattle. I called her this morning and explained my plans. She's all for them. Now, can I finish my toast?"

Harmon's face looked relieved. It might not have, if he could see the way his niece was looking at Cam. "By all means, my boy."

"To my good friend Jenny, to her uncle and to *her* good friends. To all of you."

As the glasses again lifted, Count Dracula spoke slowly. "You left out someone, young man. Someone who also played a large role in saving your neck." Both Harmon and Cam looked anxiously at the Count who paused, then said, "I refer to Dame Chance."

Jenny smiled. "Not being a practical zoologist, as was pointed out earlier, I shouldn't question you on the point. But do you really believe that Chance is a female?"

The Count appeared to gaze overly long at Ktara who, with a graceful flourish, extended her glass in his direction. He did not smile, but there was a touch of irony in his voice as he answered Jenny.

"Yes, child. In this instance, so I believe."

A scavenger hunt...

And what more appropriate place to begin the game than a funeral parlor. So many interesting things to be found.

For instance, it seems that a particular funeral director has some very strange ideas about the care and handling of the deceased. They never complain, of course.

Then there was the business of extra bodies, sometimes two per casket. How ghoulish! Count Dracula thought so. Even a blood-thirsty vampire has certain ethics to observe . . . and, in this case, certain inalienable rites are also to be deserved.

This is the second volume in the all-new Dracula Horror Series, original tales of legendary wickedness and modern-day suspense. The key to Dracula's twentieth century reincarnation is the brilliant scientist, Dr. Damien Harmon. By means of a fantastic electronic implant Professor Harmon is able to control, for the most part, the actions of Dracula in all his grim guises. Then, too, there is the eerie lady known as Ktara, and the faithful giant, Cam. Together they will transport you into the shadowy realm of the unreal for a feast of blood-bright horror! Come along, for mystery and murder in a jugular vein.